SACRED RUST CARGO ART

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ART FANTASY

SARAH KEENE MELTZOFF

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MESSENGER OF THE WAVES, 2022
Dim.: 12 × 4 in. (30.0 × 10.0 cm)

Meter made in Kokomo, Indiana from the tool bench of early 20th century Oregon carpenter, Frank S.; New Guinea Highlands cowries, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become bridewealth.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

05 **01**
SACRED RUST CARGO ART
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ART FANTASY

30 **02**
SACRED RUST
THE INVENTION OF CARGO ART AS MY ETHNOGRAPHIC ART FANTASY

31 **03**
HOUSING THE ANCESTOR SPIRITS
LEGEND OF CARGO—BIRTH OF SACRED RUST

32 **04**
ROGUE RAMO
INITIATING CARGO ART

34 **05**
NATURE BOUND
SACRED RUST STORIES

45 **06**
CARGO ART
CREATURES IN THE WILD

70 ARTIST STATEMENT OF SARAH KEENE MELTZOFF

71 SARAH KEENE MELTZOFF
VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGIST, ETHNOGRAPHER AND PHOTOGRAPHER

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My ethnographic fantasy of Cargo Art grows out of decades of fieldwork in the Solomon Islands and immersion in village life, a world far closer to nature than my hometown of New York City. My deepest thanks go to my friends, especially the families of Anna Hane'esiwe and her father Chief Halumwane of Sa'a village, and the families of Thomas Mahiki and his mother, Susie Filali of Fanalei Village.

Later research on Burmese spirit beliefs has added a compelling twist to Cargo Art, for which I am indebted to my monk friends U Aggadhama and U Komala, and to U Man Sein for teaching me about Nat culture.

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I am grateful to Mark and Simone Turner of Bull Farm 1856 for showcasing Cargo Art at their historic exhibition space, where Cargo Creatures find a home alongside exceptional ethnic art.

Portuguese artist friends Teresa Lacerda and Luísa Serôdio have inspired and promoted my work. I am grateful to Dove Bradshaw—childhood friend, New York artist, and Cargo Art champion—for her encouragement. Landscape photographer Lanny Provo initially played with my Cargo creatures, capturing beautiful images of them in the wild.

My sister Annie Laurie's support and spirit sustain me in everything. My heartfelt thanks to all.

01

SACRED RUST CARGO ART
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ART FANTASY

My mentor in the Solomons, Roger Keesing, was a phenomenal ethnographer. In *Kwaio Religion: The Living and the Dead in a Solomon Island Society* (Columbia University Press, 1982), Keesing captures the essence of Malaitan ancestor spirits, where the living and the dead coexist, and people have conversations with the spirits as part of everyday life.

After his sudden death in 1993, Keesing's ashes were brought back to the Kwaio, where he has become one of their ancestor spirits who guide and influence the living.

SETTING

Lying northeast of Australia, the Solomon Islands were rarely visited in 1973, the year I first arrived.

This archipelago of six major islands running east of Papua New Guinea in a double chain (Choiseul, New Georgia, Santa Isabel, Malaita, Guadalcanal, and Makira) was still the British Solomon Islands Protectorate.

Fig. 1
Roger Keesing among the Kwaio in 1980

Fig. 2
Honiara, Guadalcanal map. Malaita: South Malaita with Sa'a and the Port Adam Passage which has Fanalei and Walande at either end; Are'Are area, and Kwaio area, and Lau area in North Malaita.
Solomons set in relation to Australia and PNG

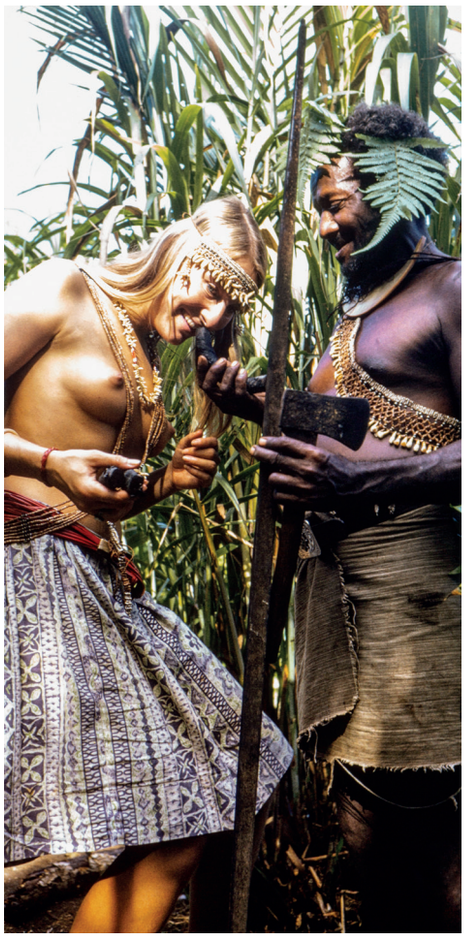

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Fig. 3
War memorial created from WWII aircraft remains, Guadalcanal, 1992

Fig. 4
Human front teeth from warrior days are worn with pride by John Dora Ouou, while Sarah is adorned in dolphin teeth and red spondylus shell money, Sa'a, 1973

All the American public knew was that the Solomons were the site of WWII battles, focused on Guadalcanal. My dream was to live on neighboring Malaita, still considered the wildest, least missionized and most traditional island. Warring clans practiced cannibalism and animism until British colonization—exactly where a budding ethnographer wanted to be. I applied for permission.

Alerted by colonial officers, the gathering of South Malaita chiefs decided where I would stay. Chief Halumwane of Sa'a Village offered to take me under his wing to live with his family.

Sa'a turned out to be a major site for Marching Rule, the Cargo Cult arising right after WWII that deeply influenced my future art, as would villagers" understanding of cargo.

CARGO, CASH AND CARGO CULT

The word *cargo* originates from the Spanish *cargo*, meaning "load" or "burden," derived from the Late Latin *carricare* meaning "to load a wagon or cart"—in essence, goods arriving on ships.

Cargo was adopted into Solomons Pijin, the *lingua franca* facilitating communication among speakers of over 70 local languages or dialects, and the British.

In Pijin, *cargo* translates as the industrial world's manufactured goods, everything from cameras and clocks to tinned food and pots.

Until long after WWII, villagers could not have fathomed the origin of *cargo*—the factories turning out metal fishhooks and machetes, rifles and engines, or bolts of cloth and brass belt buckles shaped like British lions.

Ancestor Spirits were considered the local source of subsistence, the fount of fertility. They brought success and strength, including the power for calling in dolphins from the deep sea whose teeth served as custom wealth, won in warfare and used to buy land and brides.

Once Anglican and Catholic missionaries arrived in this spiritual landscape, they converted South Malaitan villagers and founded schools, essential components of colonization. Some wise missionaries acknowledged the existence of Ancestor Spirits but ranked them underneath Jesus Christ.

People hoped that a missionary or schoolteacher might reveal the correct ceremony to communicate with the outsiders' more formidable Ancestors to tap into the *cargo*. This might explain why the British received *cargo* while they had not. Perhaps the alien Ancestor Spirits stole the *cargo* from their Ancestors? It remained frustrating. Everyone desired the useful and novel *cargo*, yet now they had to earn cash to purchase it from foreign traders and plantation company stores.

In the 1860s, a brutal indentured labor trade began, called Blackbirding. Many Malaitans were carried off in ships to distant shores (e.g. Queensland and Fiji). Those who returned home bore *cargo*.

British colonizers then replaced Blackbirding, redirecting Malaitan labor to their own Solomon Islands plantations. The colonial government, inaugurated in 1893, created a head tax to ensure youth would go work for a few years before returning home with *cargo* and cash now necessary to pay the head tax, as well as for brideprice to marry and participate in village life.

Fig. 5
Ferry from Honiara circling South Malaita to reach Sa'a and Fanalei, 2017

THE BIRTH OF CARGO CULT BELIEFS

Cargo Cult is a term applied to movements among people attempting to overthrow or offset the social, political and economic disparities of colonial rule. The Cargo Cult phenomenon sprang up on the heels of WWII in the Pacific.

The one that arose in Malaita was Marching Rule. A forerunner to independence from colonial rule, cargo cults such as Marching Rule called for village reorganization and communal labor. They sought everything from codifying customary law to securing indigenous representation in government. They often resisted unjust plantation labor practices, with many followers refusing to go to work. As a millenarian movement, followers desired utopia. Their prophets prescribed new rituals, especially ones that mirrored the mighty, like the American WWII military.

I take Cargo Cult as a metaphor for ritual actions in an attempt to gain control over lives inherently spinning like a wheel of fortune, sometimes granting us happy social relations, health and material wealth. Cargo Art, playing off Cargo Cult, voices our desire to rebalance relations between the Natural and Industrial worlds, as well as the AI world, all spiraling further apart into dystopia.

FIRST EXPERIENCE WITH MELANESIAN "CARGO" CULTURE

Before the 24-hour ferry crossing to Malaita from the capital of Honiara on Guadalcanal, I had met Wilson Ifunao. We formed a life-changing friendship. Wilson had just graduated from University of Papua New Guinea in anthropology, and his father, Robinson Manioru Oikada, was the chief of Fanalei, only 10 miles north of Sa'a. The two not only spoke different languages, but Sa'a villagers were a "bush" or garden-oriented people who had traditionally fished for the revered skipjack tuna. In contrast, Fanalei villagers were "saltwater" people who hunted dolphins. Wilson urged me to visit and provided family contacts.

6 8 9 7

Fig. 6
Tuna boiling on the surface in front of Malaita's hilly mailnland, 1979

Fig. 7
Ferry departing Port Adam Passage from Fanalei, 2016

Fig. 8
Sa'a boys with blond Hugo Dora Houkeli clapping them on, carry ceremonial Ancestor Eagle beneath *Akalo ni Matawa*, the deep-sea spirit with tuna head and tuna appendages who walks on rainbows, 1973

Fig. 9
"Duty" sentry hat from Marching Rule movement, replicating WWII American officer hats. Personal collection, Lisboa, 2025

Waving goodbye to Wilson Ifunao and friends on the Honiara wharf, I settled in for the night crossing to Malaita. Bodies found places to stretch out on the floor of the ferry cabin. By dawn, we had reached Malaita, circling the coast that rose into rainforest hills. The ferry stopped frequently at small settlements to send people ashore in the skiff with their *cargo*.

Many chewed betel nuts with lime, producing a mild narcotic effect and red juice which they would spit overboard into the sea. I tried a bit of the nut with hardtack. By midday, we had reached the east coast of South Malaita and Sa'a Village's small inlet.

As I hopped from the skiff onto shore, Chief Halumwane and his villagers greeted me with enthusiastic salutes: "Hello Joe! America come now!"

Why was I being addressed like this? I wondered.

People were thrilled to have someone literally born in New York City come to stay with them, New York being the proverbial Heaven of the GI Joes who had come during WWII. They

were recalling the happy times working alongside American GIs on Guadalcanal, and their subsequent dream of the Joes' return during Marching Rule.

THE LOGIC OF A CARGO CULT

The British government had shipped many Malaitans over to the north coast of Guadalcanal to aid the war effort, and the Joes were grateful. Sometimes Malaitans had to carry Joes up and down the slippery steep slopes to help them survive. Joes simply were not accustomed to the high humidity and heat, the mosquitoes and mud.

Malaitans also assisted in the construction of roads, bridges, and Henderson Airfield which endure to this day. After WWII, the British took advantage of this infrastructure, converting it into the capital of Honiara.

Malaitans had been surprised by the size of the American ships and planes, but especially by how they were festooned with eagles similar to the Malaitan eagle of their origin myth.

They interpreted the eagles as a sign of fraternity, just as they did the Joes' generosity and familiarity—sitting alongside their new mates, sharing tobacco, meals and other *cargo*. This open-handed behavior contrasted sharply with British aloofness. Joes were acting like true brothers.

Moreover, they met Black Joes whom they assumed were blood relations. Expressing a common sentiment about their newfound kin, one veteran explained, "Either these Blacks first settled the Solomons, or we migrated to America."

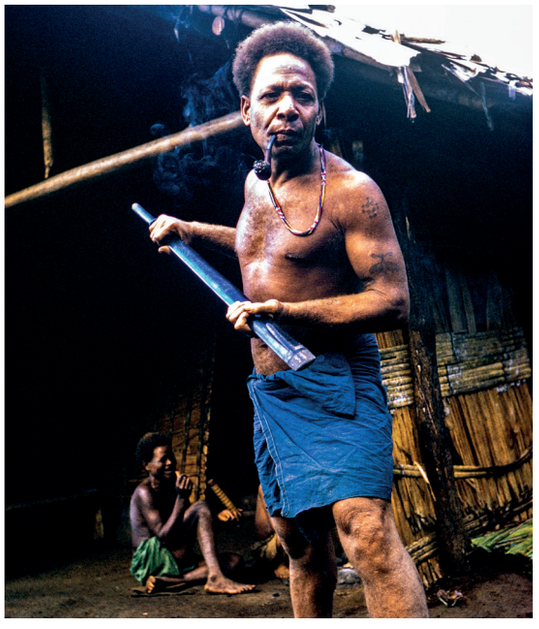
When the Pacific Front moved westward toward Papua New Guinea, the Joes left behind tons of supplies as thanks. Each Malaitan carried his personal box of precious gifts down to the wharf to board ferries bound for home.

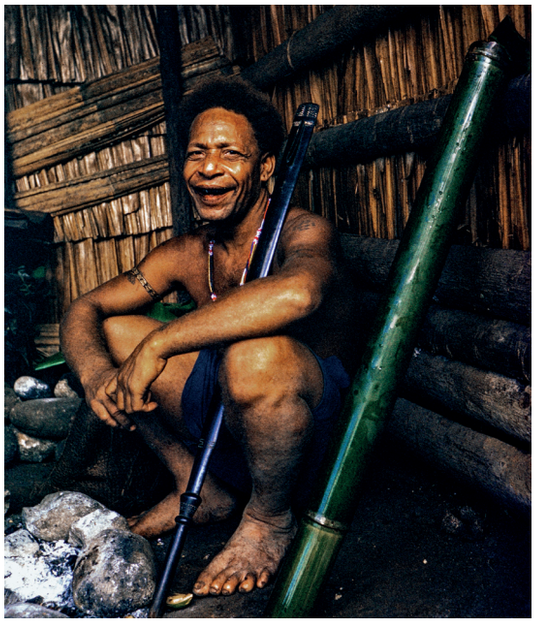
The British, however, were waiting on the wharf to intercept the boxes, and emptied most of the contents—spoons, knives, pots, buckets, plates, cloth, and other treasured items—into a veritable mountain of *cargo*. The Malaitans stood by helplessly as the British shuttled their gifts offshore, dumping them into the depths.

The Solomon Islands National Archives verified this confiscation. The British justified it as "good governance" to prevent village jealousy and fights. To regain pre-war levels of plantation labor, they had conveniently overlooked the Solomons' cultural tradition of sharing property.

The theft of *cargo* amplified the Joes' advice. Some Joes had stressed 1930s unionization efforts and labor rights, while others told the tale of the Boston Tea Party leading to American Independence. The essential message was a call for justice, to stop working as cheap labor and to seek independence from the British. With the Joes' words ringing in their ears, Malaitans started organizing Marching Rule once they returned home.

Sa'a Village was swept up in Marching Rule, though Fanalei was divided. Ardent followers turned their backs on plantation labor and defied British rule. They designed their own flag, flying the Malaitan eagle forevermore linked to the





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11 12

Fig. 10
Sa'a Village was laid out in straight rows during Marching Rule to resemble American WWII barracks, 1979

Fig. 11
Jonathan Ilala, Marching Rule leader who evaded British authorities by hiding in the rainforest for several years, demonstrates fighting stance with traditional double-nose war club, North Malaita, 1973

Fig. 12
Jonathan Ilala, continuing to live up in the North Malaita bush, 1973

American eagle. They spread the word about how a certain General "Canada", smoking a golden pipe, would guide the movement.

Determined to reassert control over their lives and acquire a fair share of *cargo*, participants adopted rituals that restructured the way they lived. Special sentries, called Duties, wore hats woven from rattan in the style of American officers.

Villagers formed communal work brigades and created Marching Rule passports to show the Americans when they returned. Each night, sentries patrolled the beaches for boot prints and cigarette butts, signs that the Joes had arrived in submarines to carry them away to a New York heaven.

Sa'a, like other places, reconfigured its living space. Isolated clans moved from settlements in the rainforest and merged down by the Sa'a inlet to form one large village resembling military barracks. They rebuilt their leaf houses into two straight rows, numbering each one.

When I came 30 years later, Sa'a still stood in these two rows, looking out through a coconut grove onto the transparent sea. People were eager to tell me what they had done.

Fig. 13
Sarah being shown Custom House in "heathen" North Malaita bush, then still largely unconverted. Note the British Lion brass belt buckle worn by the man on the left, valued colonial era *cargo*, North Malaita, 1973

From the British perspective, Marching Rule was intolerable insubordination. British punitive ships circled Malaita, arresting adherents and chasing leaders high into the rainforests where some lived in hiding for years, secretly supported by followers.

Marching Rule died out during a decade, yet managed to transform colonial rule to be more inclusive, becoming a harbinger of 1978 Independence.

ACADEMIC AND ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

In 1979, I returned to the Solomons for dissertation research (Ph.D. Cultural Anthropology, Columbia University 1982). Going back to my friends in South Malaita, I compared Sa'a as the tuna hunting village, which had been a fervent participant in Marching Rule, with nearby Fanalei, which had resumed dolphin hunting during Marching Rule to reclaim custom pride and wealth.

My fieldwork explored how Sa'a and Fanalei were having diametrically opposed interactions with the Japanese-Solomon Islands joint venture for industrial tuna fishing. The largest fishing company in the world, Taiyo, and the departing British with the nascent Solomon Islands government had formed this joint venture. While the dolphin hunters of Fanalei enthusiastically signed up to catch tuna for wages, the Sa'a traditional tuna hunters refused for nearly a decade to work in an industry catching their sacred tuna.

Sa'a blamed the joint venture for catching most of the tuna migrating along their coast, and perhaps even training the tuna to prefer industrial metal hooks over custom pearl shell fishing hooks.

Elders confided that a deeper problem was ruining their tuna hunt: Ancestor Sharks had fled. These Ancestor Sharks—shark priests who transform after death into Sharks—are the ones who draw in the tuna. Without consulting the village,

14 15 17 16 18 19

Fig. 14
Fanalei boy dreaming of going to fish for Solomon Taiyo, 1988

Fig. 15
Solomon Taiyo workers scrub the pier before fishing for tuna, Tulagi Island, 1980

Fig. 16
Sa'a men, with George Roroi wearing a tuna hunting visor, launching their custom canoes for a tuna hunt, 1979

Fig. 17
Tuna hunters setting out from Sa'a, 1979

Fig. 18
Tuna bones that were blessed, inside sacred Sa'a Canoe House, 1979

Fig. 19
Sa'a traditional pearl shell fishhooks for tuna, 1979

the government had built a clinic right on Sa'a's freshwater inlet to the sea. Women visiting for the clinic were defiling the sea with taboo menstrual and birthing blood, driving away the Ancestor Sharks, and thus the tuna.

FANALEI DOLPHIN HUNTERS" RESPONSE TO MARCHING RULE

During Marching Rule, Fanalei restarted dolphin hunting after a half century hiatus. The hunt was now conducted in the name of the Church, complete with Christian prayers. Yet success remained in the hands of the Ancestor Spirits. Prior to colonization, it had been the *ramo* warrior chiefs who called dolphins in from the deep sea when teeth were needed for payback fight compensations and brideprice.

This modern hunt required paddling to sea, reasserting cultural pride under Pax Britannica which had forbidden *ramo* warfare. The hunt provided village life with excitement for everybody.

20 21 22

Fig. 20
Pauline Filei, decked out in her family's dolphin teeth and red money wealth, Fanalei, 1973

Fig. 21
Fanalei girls practice dancing, decorated in dolphin teeth, 1973

Fig. 22
John Oiu inverts the sea turtle neck because it resembles dolphin teeth, Fanalei, 1979

23 26 24 25 27

Fig. 23
Fanalei girls wearing dolphin teeth with pride, 1973

Fig. 24
Kathy Fakaia teaching her daughter, Thompson, to string mangrove flowers as "play" teeth, Fanalei, 1973

Fig. 25
Lining up dolphins on the beach after the hunt, Fanalei, 1973

Fig. 26

Fanalei elder, Peter Felo, striking flint stones, making noise to drive the dolphins into the Passage's sacred cove, 1979

Fig. 27

Children sharing in community excitement after a successful dolphin hunt, Fanalei, 1973

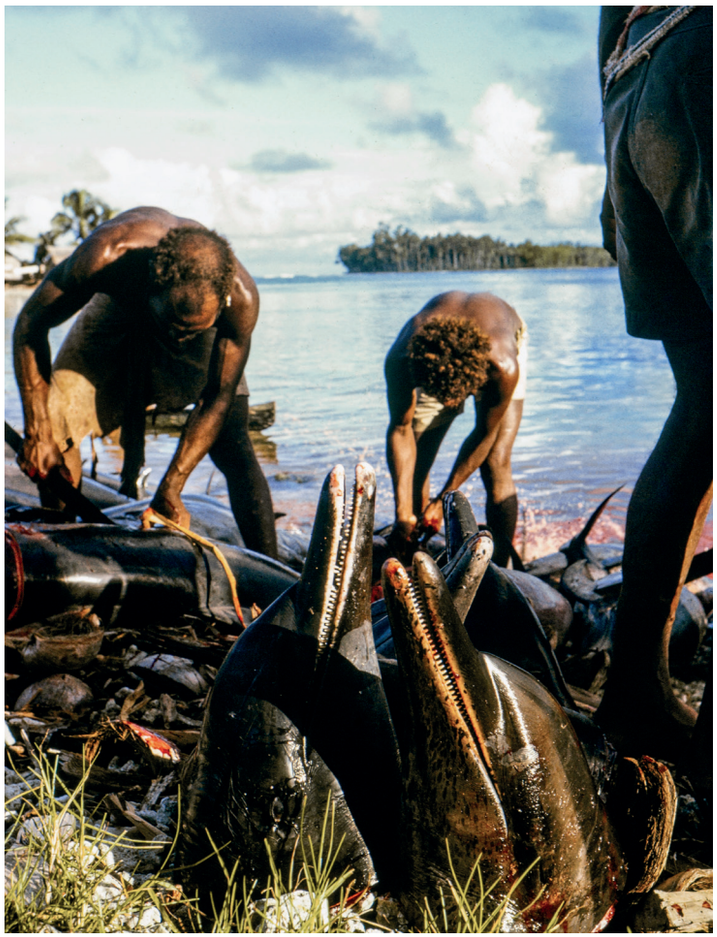


Fig. 28
Sorting the dolphin heads for Prize System distribution, Fanalei, 1973

It yielded teeth wealth throughout the four-month calm season when men set out daily in the pre-dawn for the open sea.

Only men are allowed to herd the dolphins from the ocean into Port Adam Passage between Fanalei and the Malaita mainland. Women, who could offend the Ancestors, must wait onshore with the older men who no longer have the stamina for enduring thirst and paddling hard for hours on end.

Hunters signal to each other with bamboo flag poles as they drive the fleeing dolphins by clapping flint stones underwater. Boys patrol the seashore, scanning for bamboo poles, thin wisps on the horizon. The first boys to spot them dash back to the village shouting, “Whoooeeee!”

Once the hunt reaches the mouth of the Passage, anyone who can jumps into canoes for the final roundup. Shouting and banging paddles against the sides of dugout canoes and clapping stones, they work together to drive the dolphins into the sacred cove where the bones of Ancestors lie.

29 30

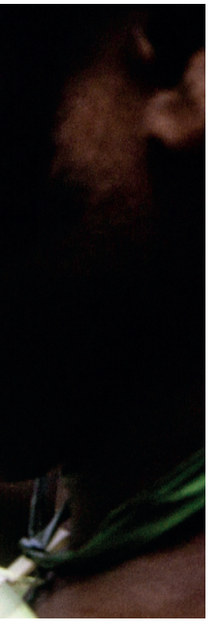
Fig. 29
Sarah Irokalani adorns her baby with custom wealth won long ago in warfare and trade, treasured throughout the SE Solomons, Sa'a, 1979

Fig. 30
Joe Wanegalo harvesting corals in the Passage that are burned to make lime to chew with betel nut, Fanalei, 1979

People splash down into the water with the dolphins and flip them up into canoes by the nose. The muscular tail can wrench a person's shoulder so it must be avoided. People ferry the dolphins back to the island for decapitation and distribution of the heads. The bodies are butchered into steaks that the women bake in stone ovens.

Fanalei created the "Prize System" to end squabbling over tooth distribution. Such fights were upsetting the Ancestor Spirits, who were making the hunt fail. The Prize System was designed to be fair: the village Church receives a 10% tithe of teeth; First Prize goes to deep-sea hunters; Second Prize is awarded to Fanalei women and men who help inside the passage; and Third Prize is for widows and guests. Teeth were to be treasured and saved particularly for brideprice.

Fanalei also invented the "Confess" ritual, derived from their Anglican Church. After each unsuccessful hunt, the community gathers around the Dolphin House to discover if



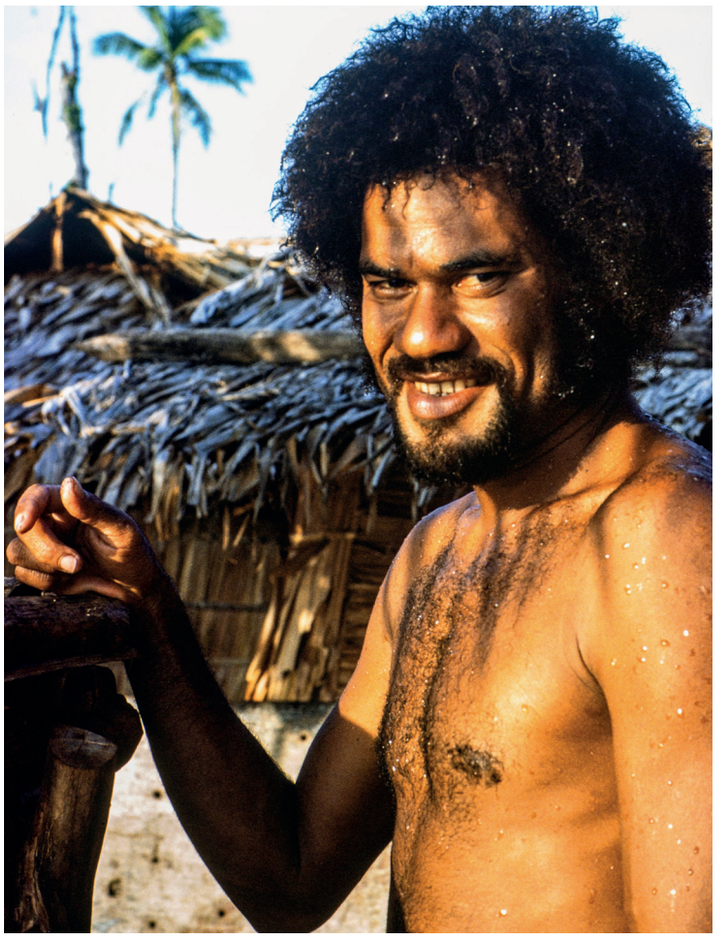


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Fig. 31
Anna Hane'esiwe watching the pigs being prepared for a feast, Sa'a, 1973

Fig. 32
Barnabas Ou'ou feeding his pet bird, Fanalei, 1979

Fig. 33
Chief Halumwane and Sarah who lives with his family at Sa'a, 1973

Fig. 34
Stanley Filei wielding a turtle-hunting spear, Fanalei, 1973

Fig. 35
Loloangili, my pet flying fox, held by Fox Irokalani, Sa'a, 1973

36 37 38

Fig. 36
Walter Dora'adi, the local doctor-nurse—called a "dresser"—after spearfishing outside the Passage, Fanalei, 1979

Fig. 37
Thomas Mahiki showing me a wild-looking growth from the Passage mangroves, Fanalei, 1973

Fig. 38
Thomas Saro carving the narrow-bladed paddle preferred by the saltwater people, Fanalei, 1973

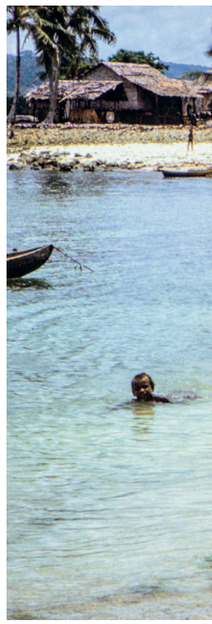

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Fig. 39
Halukeni in her dolphin teeth headband, about to carry a giant pudding wheel to the feast, Sa'a, 1973

Fig. 40
Rainforest gardens thrived in the 1970s when land could support the local population. Millie Putoro and Martha Dorakeni participate in a fine harvest, Sa'a, 1973

someone swore, or got angry or jealous, thus upsetting the Ancestors. For instance, a wife might have yelled at her husband for taking the canoe that she needed to go to the garden. Someone may have complained about eating dolphin meat too often for dinner.

MODERN TRAUMAS

Independence had carried high hopes for prosperity. But over the decades, a corrupt government has allowed international logging, mining, and tuna fishing interests to wreak havoc on the delicate ecosystem.

Even in the early 1970s, it was easy to predict damage to the fragile tropical ecosystem from transnationals, as well as from impending overpopulation. Given the extremely high birth rates, the condemnation of birth control by some churches, and the improvements in modern medicine and survival rates, inevitable overpopulation would soon stress the ecosystem. At this point, gardening and fishing for a livelihood would become difficult.

Cash today largely remains elusively outside villagers' reach. Youth in the 21st century are far less willing and able than their parents' generation to be self-sufficient through gardening and fishing. Many cannot complete high school, given their families' lack of funds for boarding fees. If they migrate to Honiara, their prospects are limited to low-paid jobs such as security guards or taxi drivers.

One third of young people settle in Honiara instead of returning home after education or labor stints. They send home income along with the imported rice and tinned fish which have become staples. Town life appears preferable to village subsistence in current difficult times.

41 42 43

Fig. 41
Raised near the Atlantic Ocean, snorkeling and sailing, I felt an instant affinity with the saltwater women and their independence. Yet the specter of overpopulation in Malaita loomed, Fanalei, 1973

Fig. 42
Slash-and-burn gardening in the rainforest depends on fallow periods of at least a decade to maintain fertility, as Ambrose Dora was doing, Sa'a, 1979

Fig. 43
Miriam Aka returning to Fanalei from mainland Malaita gardening, 2017

Lacking sufficient garden land, Sa'a and Fanalei families rarely allow their slash-and-burn gardens enough fallow time to replenish nutrients. Rather than 10 or 20 years between plantings, most barely pause a few years. Thus, the thin tropical topsoil degrades, producing poor crops.

Both catch and fish size are way down inside Port Adam Passage now that both "saltwater" and "bush" people are intensively fishing, setting myriad small-mesh gillnets and seining. Fanalei's bush neighbors are no longer intimidated by their historical dominion over the Passage.

Overfishing has been further exacerbated by the Fanalei town-based elite who are sending multiple ice chests home on the weekly ferry to be filled with fish for the Honiara cash market. Their good intentions to help villagers earn cash have backfired, intensifying the need to buy food.

Although Ancestors may still visit in dreams, cash and *cargo* increasingly dominate livelihood decisions.

DIGITAL AGE BRINGS GLOBAL AWARENESS AND DOLPHIN ACTIVISM

Continuing to visit the Solomons from 2015 to 2019, I hoped to help Fanalei friends end dolphin hunting in exchange for a 20-year accord with The Ric O'Barry Dolphin Project to fund community health and education projects. My role involved

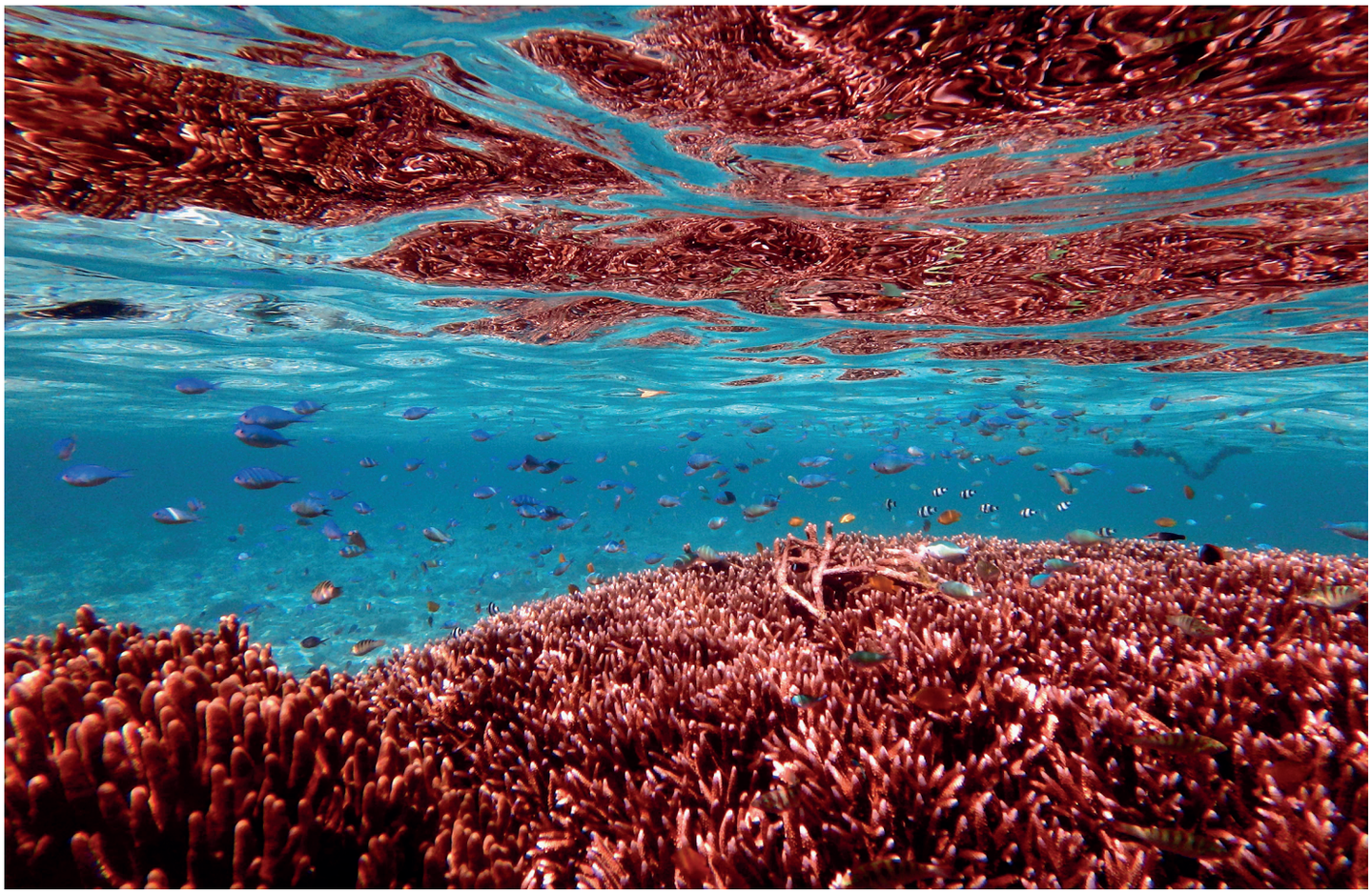

Fig. 44
The Passage's clean waters are ideal for seaweed mariculture, the current cash-earning activity, Fanalei, 2015

Fig. 45
Jack Ganifiri and Alfred Bale join everyone in weekly fishing with fine-mesh nets for the Honiara cash market, Fanalei, 2016

Fig. 46
Diana Wanegalo, Kathleen Fugui, and Anne Alaha playing at catching hold of dolphins inside the Passage, Fanalei, 2015

Fig. 47
Reenacting dolphin hunting, clapping stones underwater to drive the dolphins, 2015

Fig. 48
Pretending to swim like a dolphin, Fanalei, 2015

Fig. 49
With sea-level rise, Fanalei now floods at high tide, so Kathleen Fugui builds higher with coral rocks, like her Lau ancestors, famous island-builders, Fanalei, 2017

Fig. 50
The Passage has excellent water circulation, essential for seaweed mariculture, Fanalei, 2015

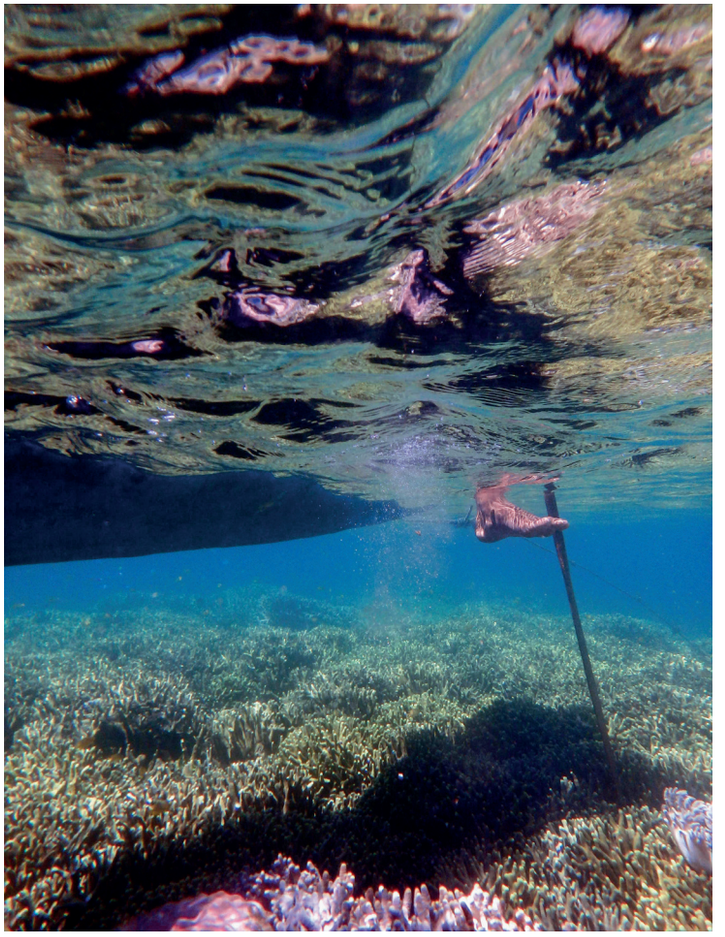

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Fig. 51
Saltwater women like Susie Filali dove daily inside the Passage, harvesting giant clams and other seafood, Fanalei Island, 1979

Fig. 52
Susie Filali resting between dives, Fanalei Island, 1979

Fig. 53
Rising seas have eaten away most of the man-made coral rock island of Walande, the other Lau village of dolphin hunters at the north end of Port Adam Passage. Villagers have had to move to the mainland opposite their former home of Walande Island, 2015

54 55 56

Fig. 54
Playing in the surf entering Port Adam Passage, Junior Kwaks lands near Fanalei Island, 2017

Fig. 55
Daisy Kokola milking coconut gratings to make coconut cream for her soup, Fanalei Island, 2016

Fig. 56
Yellow-bibbed lory (*Lorius chlorocercus*), a common pet, hanging from his bamboo perch underneath stilt house, Fanalei Island, 2018

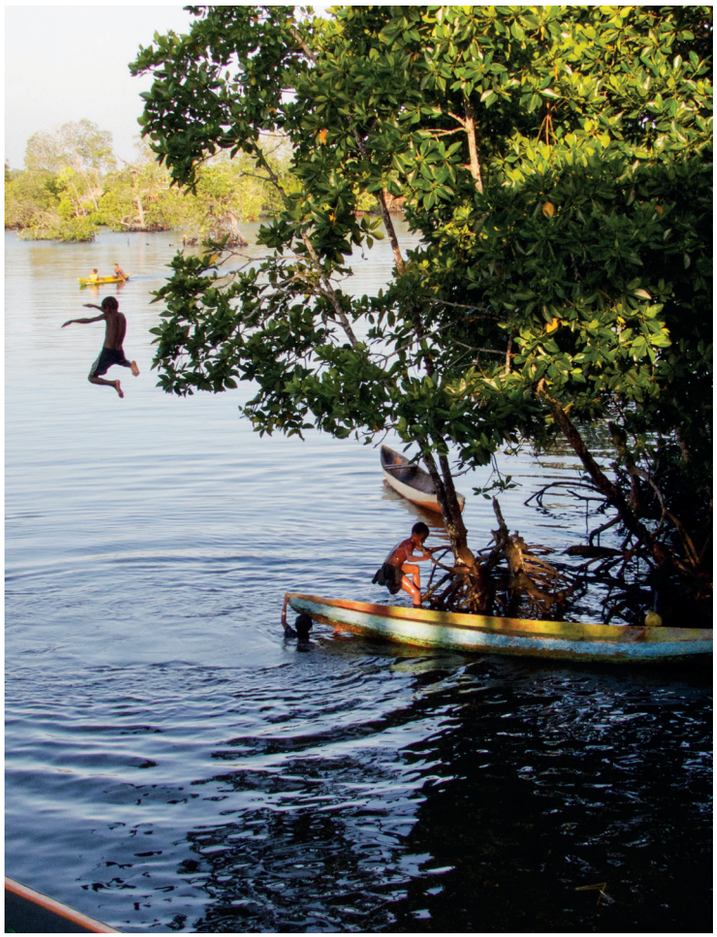
brainstorming with villagers about what they wanted and considered fair compensation. We could not reach the cultural requisite of 100% consensus. Yet even though an accord was not reached, dolphin hunting is waning.

The pro-hunting faction's main point is the need for dolphin teeth for brideprice ceremonies. However, within one week of a successful hunt, 80% of Fanalei households no longer save their share of teeth. Instead, they barter or sell them at local stores for *cargo* or cash. One dolphin translates into about 250 euros: 100 euros for the 120 good-quality teeth plus 125 euros for the 25 steaks sold at 5 euros each. Hunting has largely become about cash, which morally challenges their current UN protection as traditional cetacean hunters and becomes problematic to justify.

Cell phone towers now cover the Solomons and are altering ways of thinking and communicating. With social media celebrating dolphins, there has been a sea change in Solomon Islands public opinion. Islanders are losing pride in dolphin hunting and its cultural power to control Ancestor Spirits.

When Fanalei hunters in 2018 proudly posted bloody images of 507 decapitated dolphins on the Fanalei Facebook page, they were surprised to receive over 600 negative comments from fellow Solomon Islanders.

Hunting, moreover, is physically difficult and not a guaranteed way to earn cash and *cargo*. A successful hunt requires



57 58

Fig. 57
Pet parrot feather in his hair, Shama Kwanafia on Fanalei Islands, 2017

Fig. 58
Kids leaping from mangroves at Fou'ele, 2015

a number of canoes spanning the flat sea to spot a leaping pod of dolphins. Until recently, many men accepted the daily demanding time at sea, despite four of five days ending in a failed hunt.

By 2025, just six youths were interested enough to set out to sea. Predictably, they failed with too few canoes. All others preferred to spend time in the new seaweed mariculture that brings in guaranteed income from Chinese buyers. Luckily, Port Adam Passage maintains perfect conditions for seaweed farming, its clean seawater constantly circulating on the tides.

Although I continue to wear dolphin teeth and incorporate a few of them into my Cargo Art, my own sentiments have shifted after decades of participating in dolphin hunting culture, feeling the palpable excitement right down to the children, eating the meat, and being careful never to offend the Ancestor Spirits who grant successful hunts.

Fanalei Island, itself, is being slowly submerged by sea-level rise. Most households have moved across the Passage, building Fanalei's new settlement of Fou'ele on the Malaita mainland. My ethnographic work summarizes the situation facing these islanders: "Dolphin Hunters or Dolphin Saviors? Cultural Identity Choices Under Intensifying Sea Level Rise, Cash-Dependence, and New Eco-Christian Conservation."

We can hope that islanders regain ecological balance and sustain a sense of social well-being in village life. Meanwhile, I continue making Cargo Art to bridge the worlds of cultural anthropology and artistic expression, seeking to understand the profound changes reshaping human experience.

LISBOA AND BURMA

In late 2020, I settled into the heart of old Lisbon, my atelier overlooking Rio Tejo. I brought with me a lifelong collection of ethnic art that emphasizes Burmese pre-Buddhist culture. These Burmese nat spirits and magic medicine figures mingle perfectly with my Cargo Creatures who are conduits to a world beneath materialism's façade.

59 60

Fig. 59
Hunting for iguanas in the shoreside coconut grove, Sa'a, 1973

Fig. 60
Joe Wate Aepule caring for Norland wearing the traditional boy's hair tuft in front. Only once the boy learns to catch his first skipjack tuna can he cut it off, Sa'a, 1973

My study of objects having spirits across many cultures began decades earlier during dissertation fieldwork in Japan, where I discovered how the boundary between animate and inanimate is impermanent. In Japanese folklore, *tsukumogami* literally means "tool spirit"; when a tool reaches one hundred years old, it can acquire a soul, becoming a *tsukumogami*. Everyday items like mirrors, spoons, umbrellas, or cooking pots, through age, can also transform into supernatural beings who are frequently mischievous.

Years later, in the pre-Buddhist nat culture of Burma, I found a parallel animist dimension that added more layers to Cargo Art. Locals seek permission at nat shrines from these guardian spirits who are considered the owners of territories: villages, hilltops, trees, rivers and ponds. Both traditions—Japanese *tsukumogami* and Burmese nat spirits—reveal how objects and places harbor spirits, inspiring my artistic exploration of these animistic beliefs.

After 20 years of annual fieldwork, the Burmese February 2021 coup blocked access to this meditative realm. Military violence still reigns in 2026, but some nats have taken refuge with me in my Lisboa home alongside Cargo Creatures.

The nat spirits that have come to inhabit my atelier belong to an ancient tradition. They originated from the pantheon of 37 Insider Nats who represent powerful nats with wide appeal, selected by King Anawrahta of Bagan a thousand years ago in his campaign to wean people away from myriad nats to promote Buddhism. Instead, his royal endorsement created enduring syncretic beliefs blending Buddhism and nat worship. Nats are usually humans who suffered harsh deaths, transforming into spirit guardians.

Until the early 21st century, most Burmese maintained dual faith in Buddhism and the nats, despite attempts by some monks to redirect people toward purely Buddhist practice. Yet, nat culture and magic beliefs are diminishing due

to the globalizing internet, ubiquitous cellphones and TV airing popular South Korean soap operas. Industrial logging and mining operations are destroying teak forests and stripping landscapes into moonscapes for minerals. Yet, villagers still see nature as home to nats. Conservationists can rely on these communities to protect old trees that house nat shrines because they fear nats, respecting their territories.

HUMANS AS ART IN NEW GUINEA

In 1973, and again in 1980, I trekked from Mount Hagen in the Western Highlands of New Guinea down to the Ramu River, passing through many villages and attending their *sing-sings* with dancers decorated beyond my wildest imaginings, expanding my sense of humans as Art itself. Along the way, I collected bridewealth cowries and nassa shells that have found their way into my Cargo Art as the eyes to see shadows.

61 62 63 64 65 66

Fig. 61
Dancer in a red barkcloth vest bites down on a crossbar holding a ring of boars' tusks to frame his face for the Popondetta *sing-sing*, Northern Papua coast, 1973

Fig. 62
Maring dancer wearing his tribe's unique green beetle bonnet, constructed of hundreds of bamboo slivers strung with the thoraxes of iridescent green beetles, Maring *sing-sing*, Western Highlands, 1980

Fig. 63
Big man with vivid blue beard directing his troupe with a whistle. His pig-tally necklace contains one bamboo tube for each pig donated at feasts, Mt. Hagen *sing-sing,* Western Highlands, 1973

Fig. 64

Sarah wearing the golden-lipped pearl shell necklace called a kina, after which the PNG currency is named, at the Mendi *sing-sing*, Southern Highlands, 1973

Fig. 65
A young woman, her face painted red and yellow, joins the troupe in a cascading cassowary feather headdress, in contrast to the men who wear human hair wigs and have blackened their faces, Mendi *sing-sing*, Southern Highlands, 1973

Fig. 66

Dancer wearing shell wealth, painted black, red and white to match and thus unify his troupe with the ancestor spirits, at the Goroka *sing-sing*, Eastern Highlands, 1980

02

SACRED RUST
THE INVENTION OF CARGO ART AS MY ETHNOGRAPHIC ART FANTASY

Cargo Art with Sarah framed by Sa'a tuna hunter's visor, 1991

From the Solomon Islands to Burma, from coastal Chile to Galápagos, I have practiced ethnography since the early 1970s. In 1984, I became a professor at University of Miami's Rosenstiel School of Marine, Atmospheric, and Earth Science, exploring human-environment interactions. That same year, I coined the name Cargo Art and started fabricating my own anthropomorphic creatures with cultural material from my fieldwork.

Moving beyond Found Objects and Assemblage (e.g. Picasso's bicycle seat bull; Max Ernst's insects), I invented a personal *Raw Vision* immersed in ethnic art motifs and ethnographic understanding.

It has felt natural to explore many cultures during my lifetime, to love and collect artifacts, making my own ethnographic art fantasy.

Springing from a childhood understanding that spirits inhabit objects as well as living things, I feel an instinctive kinship with people's deeply rooted animist beliefs. Within the sphere of mythos, I am continuously finding objects to forge into power figures, imbuing them with Spirits from a pre-industrial landscape.

Inside machine-driven society, I see anthropomorphic faces in everything from old tools to motorcycle parts, discovering potential beings in attics, flea markets, and workshops. I repurpose *cargo* by transforming these representatives of industry into Cargo Art, combining them with custom wealth objects and bits of wildlife: Highlands New Guinea bride-wealth cowries; Solomon Islands cat's eyes—the operculum of green turban sea snails; vertebrae and skulls; ancient Burmese beads; or vintage African amulets.

Malaita, where I did my first ethnography among former cannibals and dolphin hunters, inspired me to play off Cargo Cult logic. I was motivated to make a fanciful alternative, but one that could have been a rational interaction with the inequities of colonialism.

Cargo Art, on the flip side, serves those of us who lead lives heavily laden with material goods yet relatively disconnected from real time in nature or getting to experience different cultures. It expresses mourning for shores being swallowed by rising seas, rainforests denuded, and oceans swept by industrial fishing.

Cargo Creatures are conduits across realities, grounding our spirits to Earth and Sea with humor and compassion. The purpose of Cargo Art is easing discontent and generating understanding that preserves memory of disappearing cultures as AI predominates.

03

HOUSING THE ANCESTOR SPIRITS
LEGEND OF CARGO—BIRTH OF SACRED RUST

Occasional machines fly over rainforest gardens startling flocks of cockatoos, while others roar past canoes hunting tuna or dolphins, frightening off both the catch and the Ancestor Spirits who assist.

Cargo is brought home from wage labor, or it washes up on the tides, flotsam discovered by a child collecting seashells or a woman seeking octopuses in tide pools. Anyone wishing for an empowered object carries the *cargo* to the cove where Ancestor Spirits reside, the living-dead who hold sway over daily life.

Here, a woman with knowledge of incantations and naming invites an Ancestor Spirit to enter, giving the *cargo* eyes to see shadows. Invoking the Ancestor to join the alien spirit of the *cargo*, she places the Cargo Creature among the Ancestor skulls on the coral rock platform.

Villagers keep Cargo Creatures as guardian figures, masks, amulets and charms for fortune and protection, to reappropriate control over their universe.

So it is that people living closer to nature than ourselves choose to house their Ancestors with "Civilization"—which in Pijin signifies the modern world—forming Sacred Rust.

04

ROGUE RAMO
INITIATING CARGO ART

ROGUE RAMO, 1984
Dim.: 18×10 in. (46.0×25.0 cm)

Harley Davidson gas tank autographed by the old sign-painting folk artist "Outlaw" Jesse Howard, found in his field in Fulton, Missouri; New Guinea Highlands bridewealth cowries and chambered nautilus scoop shells blackened from being stored over the kitchen fire, and a Simbai Valley cone shell nose ornament.

I had spotted the rusted Harley tear-drop gas tank among the tall grasses of Outlaw Jesse Howard's farm while on a field trip to meet this legendary Outsider artist in 1982, a year before he died. Outlaw Jesse graciously autographed the back for me.

The shape of the tank evoked spirit carvings I had admired while hiking along the Ramo River, New Guinea. So I gave my first Cargo Creature eyes of Highlands New Guinea bridewealth cowries, like those used in many ethnic artifacts. Over one ear, I hung a New Guinea chambered nautilus necklace covered in cookfire soot, and placed a well-worn Highlands cone shell nose disk below his nose. Naming him Rogue Ramo, I initiated the private world of Cargo Art.

HARLEY-DAVIDSON

05

NATURE BOUND
SACRED RUST STORIES

La Sirene, spirit of the sea, is represented by the trident. She plays with humans daring to soar weightless through her element, teaching them to fly higher by freediving deeper. If they have spoken to her kindly, she offers them her pearls and returns them to the air. Feeling euphoria holding the keepsake, the diver cannot remember La Sirene, just the thrill of flying.

This is the head of a power staff made by divers in tropical seas who invoke La Sirene to help them reach greater depths to find luminous pearls.

Offerings:
first pearl found by a newly initiated pearl diver which is cast back into the sea on the next full moon

Incantation:
La Sirene
in bright moonlight
on flight
into infinity
in the sea
Breathless euphoria
seeking small moons

Moonbright
Seabright

MAN IS A BIPED WITHOUT FEATHERS (PLATO), 1992
Dim.: 10 × 3 in. (25.0 × 8.0 cm)

Metal fishing harpoon from the pioneer days of Haines, S.E. Alaska; ceramic doll head recovered from the ashes of a refuse fire at a monkey forest temple behind Osaka; oriole beak after a South Miami cat ate lunch; tiny bone from a high and dry cave mouth in Little Harbor, Abaco, Bahamas.

PRIMITIVE FUTURIST: GOODMAN, 1992
Dim.: 10 × 4 in. (25.0 × 10.0 cm)

Old wooden scriber from German ship's carpenter; Solomon Islands cat's eyes—the operculum of green turban sea snails; pearly shell found by Goodman along the Santa Barbara beach.

In our world there is no separate future, only Now in circular form. Repetitions of the ancestors, born and reborn again in new configurations, shifting roles—a father becomes son, a daughter becomes grandmother. In our puddle of time, we are a community of the living and dead who visit in waking dreams. We see the future as both in this moment and before.

The missionaries who land on our beaches call us "primitive" while praising their own God and a state of linear progress driven by calendars and wristwatches.

We could go to work for *cargo* on distant shores where the watch hands would tell us when to labor and rest. And we, too, could keep track of our birthdays and celebrate the birthday of their Son God. Perhaps then they might stop calling us lazy.

One missionary gave me this wooden object, saying it had been used to build ships, like one that could carry us to Civilization.

Why would we want to build a ship and leave the Ancestors behind? They would never make the journey without proper offerings. They feed on wave-worn shells from our beaches and smoke from plants grown near the Ancestor skulls.

Instead, I offered the Ancestors this tool to inhabit. Now they can bring us wristwatches—those beautiful armbands—without our having to obey the time of Civilization.

Offerings:
watch faces and shells weathered in storms are placed inside the circle of time drawn on the sand

Incantation:
Isn't it odd
that time
told by a circle face
is really a line
*to the mwane ni haka?**

**mwane ni haka* means "men of the ship", foreigners who circle our islands like missionaries or traders.

MY GRANNY ATE PEOPLE: HAPPY CANNIBAL, 19923
Dim.: 12 × 8 in. (30.0 × 20.0 cm)

Black and red wooden pattern for sand casting of a metal machine part in the first half of the 20th century, from Wisconsin; voodoo *maabi* bark bundle sold by Isidor and Carmel Botanica in Little Haiti, Miami; Mali black and red glass beads from Paris flea market; burned vertebrae; Solomon Islands cat's eyes—the operculum of green turban sea snails.

Tama had been roasting yams on the fire for her five children, carefully scraping the charcoal off each one with a clamshell and setting it back at another angle to cook some more. It was hot work inside the kitchen house. The leaf walls held in much of the woodsmoke, burning the eyes of all the hungry ones gathered on the ground around the fire. The sun still was white, not near setting. Susie, a clan leader and sister of the chief, mother of Tama's husband, leaned into the doorway. She noted that the stack of firewood no longer reached half

way up the kitchen wall. She started to lecture her daughter-in-law, "Tama, go paddle across the Passage to cut more wood."

Tama continued to scrape the yams. She had already crossed to the mainland garden that day and dug yams and carried water home to their island to drink. Susie repeated herself. Tama still ignored her, feeling tired and that the request was unreasonable. There was no pressing need in her mind, as there seemed to be in Susie's, to have a wall of wood. Susie's eyes started to spark, "You are a lazy outsider. You are not a hardworking saltwater woman worthy of my son. You cost nothing."

Tama came from a different ethnic group on a western island with different customs. She had eloped with Susie's eldest son, Winston Churchill, before she had even started to flood (menstruate). It was true that Susie never had to pay a brideprice to Tama's relatives, but it wasn't their custom anyway. Susie still resented that she had never gotten the opportunity to show her wealth by buying her son a bride.

Tama's eyes flashed straight into Susie's, aggression fueled. "Who do you think you are, old woman, to tell me what to do?"

Susie responded, "Have you looked inside my box and seen the thousands of dolphin teeth and fathoms of red shell money?!"

Dolphin teeth and red spondylus bead shell money* are the money to buy everything from brides and land, to feast food and canoes. Tama knew Susie once had a fortune, but that her youngest son had been pilfering her supply to support his periodic trips to the distant capital and his taste for trade store *cargo*, such as cassettes and sunglasses, beer and canned beef.

"Your box is almost empty," Tama snorted, standing up and wiping her hands on her long, full cotton skirt. Both women wore this style skirt introduced by missionaries, and were bare-breasted, practical for the sweltering equatorial humidity. Sweat and charcoal glistened on their skin.

Susie stepped inside the smoky kitchen and the children receded, leaving the two women in the fire's glare. Susie knew she needed a powerful retort. She growled, "My Granny ate people!"

At this, Tama grabbed a scissors wedged in the leaf rafters and stabbed her own forearm, now gushing red, yelling, "And that's how my father fights people!"

The sight of Tama's blood and violence, sent Susie running far up the beach, away from the village. Nobody saw her until the next morning, after she had spent the night under a fallen tree. Both women's anger had cooled. Susie never told Tama what to do again. Tama continued to work almost as hard as Susie, who was one of the strongest, most ambitious women on the island.

Offerings:
red shell money and red berries placed around the idol to ask for strength in fighting and making peace

Incantation:
Granny
eat my enemy
accept the red reward
Joe
join the feast
paddle in my canoe

*Red shell money was the classic compensation payment to a *ramo* warrior for his protection or mercenary service.

The spiritual heritage of this idol derives from pride in a relatively recent cannibal warrior past, as well as from witnessing Joe, the proverbial American soldier in WWII who is still described by islanders as sensationally fierce.

HEADING FOR SIMPLY ANYWHERE, 1992
Dim.: 6 × 4 in. (15.0 × 10.0 cm)

Fish skull blackened over the cookfire of Solo Village on the volcanic island of Simbo, Western Solomons; Greek clay marbles; old wooden pulley found with Annie Laurie in the golden grasslands of California; West African worn leather triangular talisman from Paris flea market; yellow New Guinea snail shell; Solomon Islands bark fiber.

She died that morning and by afternoon, the sheer walls leading into the volcanic cave at the center of the island bore her farewell message. She left behind a picture of a fish head painted in clays.

When her relatives climbed up the mountain trail and peered down into the crater, they spotted shreds of betel nut husk and the blood-red betel nut juice she had spat on the mossy rocks. She had been there for sure, chewing the slightly narcotic nut that everyone enjoys all day long. Betel remains are a sure sign that a person has been in a place.

They understood that after she drew the fish, she had departed through the cave tunnel to the Island of the Dead. They wished her well in song. The next day, fishermen from her clan caught the exact type of fish she had depicted, and shared it among clan members.

Her daughter placed the fish skull in the kitchen rafters above the cookfire. Here she let it blacken with smoke tar over several yam seasons, before taking it to the cove of the Ancestor skulls to be turned into a power object.

A piece from a visiting ship became its body, with metal feet that swing. May this merging of Spirits take flight as a ship waterbird idol, granting safety on distant travels, speeding faster than any ordinary canoe.

Offerings:
betel nuts and the lime powder which acts as a catalyst, turning the juice crimson and more psychoactive; charcoal drawings of fish

Incantation:
Bird head
shoot through the tunnel
stride across the sea
Come back to me

ONE SHOULD WORSHIP A DOG BY BECOMING ONESELF A DOG, 1992
Dim.: 21 × 7 in. (53.0 × 18.0 cm)

Headless Roman centurion crèche figure of Palochina andMolave woods, circa 1870, from Bohol, East Visayas, Philippines; dog skull found in abandoned sisal factory, Xixim Hacienda, Yucatan; Lama dog's license; pair of canine teeth, custom wealth from S.E. Solomons; bone lying in cave mouth, Little Harbor, Abaco, Bahamas; pair of badger claws that Ken Dog and Dr. Gocke brought me from the Oglala Sioux powwow, Sioux Falls, South Dakota; West African fetish bundle from Paris flea market; Lanny Provo's glass marble photo props.

Dog meat tastes sweet and we wear their canine teeth on necklaces. But everyone knows that pigs are smarter than dogs and cleaner. Dogs eat shit, get kicked, and usually remain nameless in a village pack. However, we call each pig by name, like Apple Basket and Coconut Lover. Pigs are precious and sell for fathoms of red shell money. They are only eaten at feasts.

Personally, I like dogs and feel a kindred spirit. When we take them hunting wild pigs in the rainforest, they face the sharp tusks. I have heard that high in the hills, bands of over 50 dogs roam. I know a man who said he was treed by them and couldn't go home until he awoke the next day, after the dogs had moved on to something more interesting.

I wonder if the wild dogs would know I am one of them at heart, that I wear their teeth and make offerings to their spirits. They might think I'm an ordinary human who just stones them without honor or name, and eats them without prayers. I shall try to find a band one day and beg them to let me join to dwell in the forest as Dog Woman.

Offerings:
dog tooth, dog hair, dried fish (smelly), bones, small stones, pig tusk

Incantation:
Living in the forest
no need for human hands

Sharp teeth and claws
together in a band

Black dog, mange dog,
yellow dog, flee dog

Tail high in the wind dog
see me as kin

ARIEL, THE THEORETICAL PHYSICIST, 1992
Dim.: 10 × 1 in. (23.0 × 3.0 cm)

Key West artist's well-used paintbrush with black bristles; South Malaitan red spondylus shell money and *unubulu* dolphin teeth wealth; New Guinea Highlands nassa shell wealth, cut and pierced; Naga tube bead from Nagaland in N.E. India.

During Fanalei's dolphin hunting season, when the sea is flat and their leaping lines can be spotted at a distance, the foreign woman arrived. She came out of the blue by the overnight ferry, saying how much she wanted to see us catch the "man-fish". My brother, who worked in town, had urged her to come visit us after she admired his dolphin teeth necklace.

We were nervous. Guests never ask permission to stay, that would be questioning generosity and against custom. So how could we be good hosts, respect our brother, and also en-

sure the success of the hunt? Although she seemed respectful and interested, she could inadvertently ruin our hunt if she offended the Ancestor Spirits.

The chief decided she would stay with his sister, my mother. I helped carry her trunk up into the leaf house on stilts, opposite our kitchen. She would sleep in a back room by herself. We hung her mosquito net and invited her to tea. As a gift, she had brought a sack of sugar, but she didn't want sugar stirred in among the tea leaves in her cup. What strange taste.

While we drink tea, my mother, fingering her teeth necklace, starts to instruct. She describes how last week, Fanalei landed 200 dolphins. First Prize for deep-sea hunters was two and a half heads. Second Prize for those who participated inside the Passage, like herself and the other women, was half a head. As a guest, the woman along with widows might win Third Prize, if the hunt is successful.

Each head has about 120 wearable teeth which we drill and string, before they are stashed away to buy garden land or a bride.

Hunter families also receive the bodies, which are cut into steaks, the meat wrapped in banana leaves and covered in hot stones to bake overnight. The next morning, women paddle to sell this strong-tasting, stringy, red meat at other Passage villages.

Dinner tonight was going to be dolphin meat in coconut milk, steamed in a bamboo tube, and it is vital to partake to please the Ancestors. During hunting season, nobody insults the Ancestor Spirits or the hunt will fail. The foreign woman, having listened carefully while sipping her tea, nods understanding.

A week passes without sighting dolphins at sea. At first, the woman wanders between the houses observing life, pointing at pigs roaming about and boys playing kickball with a pig bladder. She helps my mother grate coconut meat to make coconut milk for soup-soup. She seems to like the soup-soup with sweet potatoes. Key, she eats the red meat. After several days, she settles into the shade of the coconuts along the narrow strip of sand by the boys looking seaward for any sign of the hunters.

I come to watch her. From a box, she takes out sticks with black hair on one end, and bottles of powdered colors which she mixes with oil but not coconut oil. She dips the hair sticks into the different colors then onto a small board. My face appears. I feel like I am looking into the mirror my father brought back from his plantation days. She hands me one of the fat hair sticks to keep, calling it a "paintbrush", but she tucks my image into her box.

The next day, the boys on the lookout shout Whooeee! Those in the village jump into canoes for the final roundup. We drive the whole pod of dolphins into the Passage's sacred cove, banging the sides of the canoes and shouting. Anybody strong enough to flip a "man-fish" into a canoe by its long nose plunges down into the muddied water.

The woman watches from inside my canoe. Despite her initial excitement and curiosity, she starts to cry when a dolphin slung into our canoe thrashes madly, turning the water in the bottom blood-red. I beg her to be quiet before anyone notices how she is being ungrateful to the Ancestor Spirits. No luck, she keeps pleading with me to throw it back, to spare its life. Others hear. We try to ignore her as we ferry all the dolphins back to Fanalei and line them up on the beach. However, the damage is done.

Thankfully, she departs in a week on the next ferry. The hunters fail for the rest of the season. Sometimes they'd start to herd but lose the leaping line at sea, swearing at each other. They know who to really blame.

I take her hair stick to the keeper of the Ancestors. She gives it a dolphin teeth necklace and prays to the Spirits to forgive and bring back the "man-fish", painting a happy reality.

Offerings:
coconut oil, bits of colorful cowries, hibiscus flowers, a dolphin tooth

Incantation:
Whooeee
Calm seas

Bring the man-fish
brideprice teeth
market meat

Flat seas
Whooeee

THE ABILITY TO SEE SHADOWS, 1992
Dim.: 5×8 in. (13.0×20.0 cm)

Early Brownie Junior box camera found with filmmaker Leslie Thornton at an Ohio hippie fair; Solomon Islands cat's eyes—the operculum of green turban sea snails; New Guinea Highlands cuscus fur; pheasant feather.

A man named Mr. Ted visited our island a couple of times. He came on the Chinese trade boat circling through the Passage to buy sea cucumbers, pearl shells, and dried coconut meat, called *copra*. We would climb up over the gunwales to the store-room in the stern to trade for metal fishhooks, Hong Kong cloth, Sunlight soap, Joy biscuits, matchboxes, tinned beef and canned mackerel, black tea and sugar.

The first time, Mr. Ted had popped out of the wheelhouse, leaning over the railing and waving a black box at us. He point-

ed first at it and then at us, nodding vigorously. We grinned back. He held it up to his eyes and started twisting things.

The following day, my daughter who had been in my canoe, made her own black box. Cutting eyes in it, she ran around peering at us, making everyone laugh.

The next time with the trade boat arrived, we had filled three burlap bags with dried coconut meat. Balancing these, my daughter and I paddled out. There was Mr. Ted again, with the box hanging around his neck. This time, however, he was waving a paper, signaling for my daughter to climb on board to retrieve it. Scrambling up the side, she perched by Mr. Ted to examine the offering. "My word!" she shouted, "Come quick!"

What did she mean? So I clambered up, too. I saw myself caught still, in black and white. I felt like I was looking into my own soul, like we say when you see the deadly black-and-white banded coral snake in the sea.

Mr. Ted presented me the image, saying that even when I died, my family could never forget my face. Mr. Ted didn't know how when we die, we can still visit in waking dreams, offering advice and chiding misdeeds.

Back in the village, everyone else now wanted their own image. They saw how this could show our faces to those who never met us. Or we could give it to someone leaving on a journey so they remember us and return. Maybe it could even be placed on our graves to show those still unborn what we looked like.

Mr. Ted came on tour once more. This time I invited him to come ashore for tea. We communicated in Pijin English, the common trade talk. Seated outside our leaf kitchen house, he accepted two cups of tea yet refused sugar. This seemed strange since everyone loves heaping many spoonfuls of sugar. He did enjoy eating a purple roasted yam, staring at the violet shades inside. So I told him the story how yams had had a battle where some were wounded, thus turning the flesh different colors.

He pointed to our feast pudding bowl on the platform above the cookfire. It was carved as a frigate bird who brings the tuna, its wood blackened with bark juice and inlaid with chamber nautilus in pearly zigzags. I decided to give it to him. After all, he admired the bowl and had shared my image. As we left the kitchen, I pulled it down and handed it to him, "Belong you now."

He was so happy, turning even pinker than before. "Hem big something too much. You must takem camera belong me, no matter you no savy work hem." (You must take my camera, even if you don't know how to use it.)

With this, he put his black box into my hands and showed me how to look through the holes.

Mr. Ted never did return and the camera has never given birth to more images. But we wait. Who might emerge? I had the keeper of Ancestors put my grandmother's spirit inside to guide its vision. It seems to have the ability to see shadows.

Offerings:
Photo images of faces and hands, tropical fruit and yams, tea leaves

Incantation:
Search the shadows
of my mind
of the night
for the departed

WHEN BIRD MET MIDNIGHT, 1987
Dim.: 10 × 6 in. (25.0 × 15.0 cm)

Wood block found in seaweed on Key Biscayne; red motorcycle dome part presented to me by Longevity Team's John Long at his workshop along the Miami River; New Guinea Highlands bridewealth cowries, dog tooth, and feathers from the flightless cassowary.

Cassowary birds cannot breed in a village. They must be free to run through the New Guinea forest to have their babies. Flightless, their long, powerful legs can kick humans trying to catch them. I carve daggers from their leg bones which look human.

Cassowaries have hard red casks on top of their heads and wispy feathers that will not hold the wind in blade formation. These airy black feathers, we wear them in our headdresses or as a cascading topknot to make our hair look bigger. Their quills are black, hollow sticks that make good nose ornaments with the ends tufted in parrot colors.

Soon there will be a feast and all-night *sing-sing* to honor the boys with freshly pierced noses. I want to serve cassowary meat. It will help turn the boys into sure-footed runners. We've also created a power figure of cassowary feathers and machine part to ensure strength, kicking up dust.

Offerings:
cassowary quill, nuts and bolts, red feathers, mud from mountain path

Incantation:
Flightless fighters
kick up dust
Airy earth-bound
dance all night

06

CARGO ART
CREATURES IN THE WILD

CONJURING FISH, 1990
Dim.: 11 × 7 in. (28.0 × 18.0 cm)

Red Climax brand bottle capper from Key West; wooden popper fishing lure with glass eyes that caught dinner off Mackinac Island, Michigan; New Guinea Highlands cowries, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become bridewealth.

THOSE WHO WALK RAINBOWS AS BRIDGES, 2000
Dim.: 9 × 3 in. (23.0 × 8.0 cm)

WWII Coca-Cola bottle stamped “San Francisco” on the bottom, melted by bombing in the Marshall Islands, where I found it in situ; Solomon Islands cat’s eyes—the operculum of green turban sea snails; African porcupine quill; New Guinea Highlands cuscus headband from a warrior headdress.

EVEN THE CAT KNOWS HOW TO BE CONTENT, 1992
Dim.: 24 × 10 in. (61.0 × 25.0 cm)

Black wooden pattern for sand casting of a metal machine part in the first half of the 20th century, from Wisconsin; beak from a Florida Keys turtle skull; Solomon Islands cat’s eyes—the operculum of green turban sea snails.

ICEE BEAR PAW, 1992
Dim.: 14.5 × 3 in. (37.0 × 8.0 cm)

Metal ice pick from the pioneer days of Haines, SE Alaska, found while seeing how the Tlingit First People are divided over logging their land; Solomon Islands cat's eyes—the operculum of green turban sea snails; operculum of an edible snail inhabiting the Lunga River, Guadalcanal, found during the WWII Guadalcanal Campaign's 50th Year Anniversary in the Solomon Islands.

TELL THE CLOUDS TO WAIT,
TELL THE LAKE TO FORGET, 1992
Dim.: 7 × 2 in. (18.0 × 5.0 cm)

Hammerhead from the frontier days of Haines, S.E. Alaska; well-fished lure; Chinese medicinal oxhead root sent by Dr. Ong; black pearl shell buttons produced by the Pohnpei button factory; Japanese *hanko* seal red ink from Kyoto; New Guinea clay; Naga glass bead from Nagaland in NE India.

I HAVE MET THE EYES OF MY NATIVE COMPANIONS, 1987
Dim.: 8 × 5 in. (20.0 × 13.0 cm)

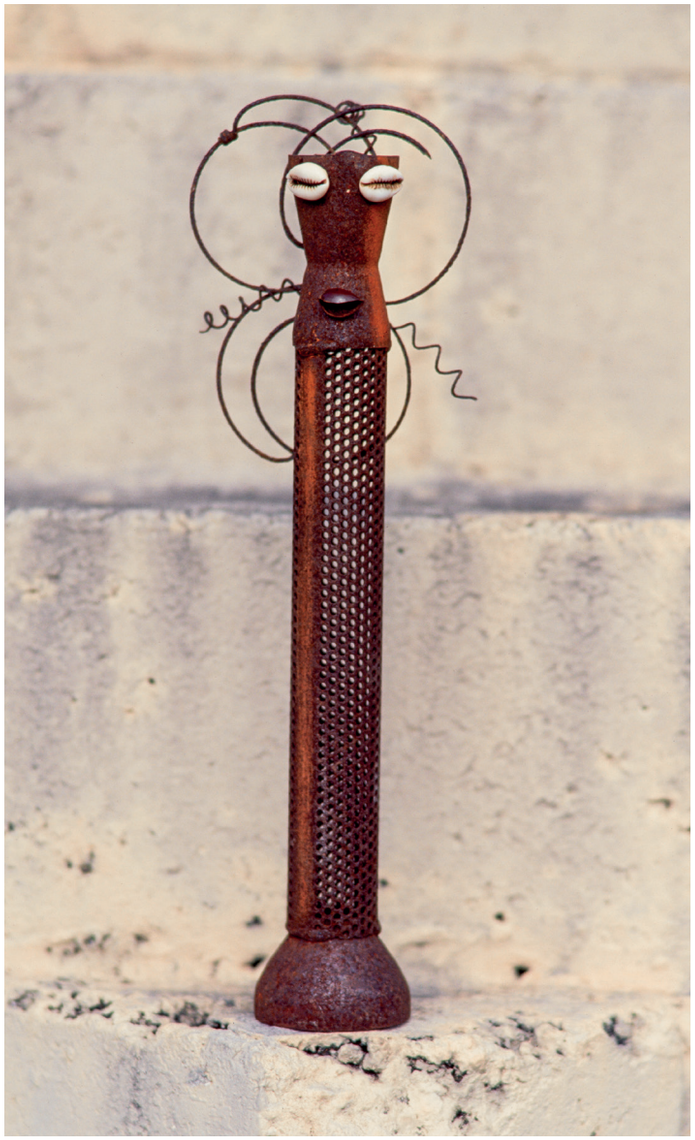
Piece of ship washed ashore on Key Biscayne, Florida; New Guinea Highlands cowries, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become bridewealth; Maring tribe pubic apron of bark fiber rope from New Guinea Highlands; black paint from tree ash and sap made in Kalona Village, near Fanalei, South Malaita, Solomon Islands.

IT'S GOD FOR YOU, 1993
Dim.: 12 × 5 in. (30.0 × 13.0 cm)

Antique Kellogg telephone that was Father Stanley's prop for the Bicentennial Bell Telephone Book cover; Greek votive charm wishing for a baby; West African fetish from Parisian flea market; Amazon blue and yellow parrot feathers; New Guinea Highlands cowries, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become bridewealth.

ENTERING THE AGE OF PLAY, 1993
Dim.: 14 × 10 in. (35.0 × 25.0 cm)

Minnie Folds" Model A jack found in my Miami Shores basement; Greek clay marbles; Greek votive charm wishing for a baby; vertebrae; Florida Keys wool sponge.



IRRESISTIBLE, 1989
Dim.: 14 × 2 in. (35.0 × 5.0 cm)

Metal grill tube; mattress springs found in the mangroves of Stock Island, Florida Keys; New Guinea Highlands cowries, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become bride-wealth; Solomon Islands dance rattle seed and red clay.

DREAMING OF CHASING STICKS, 1993
Dim.: 5 × 5 in. (13.0 × 13.0 cm)

Indonesian carved wooden horse; Greek blue glass evil eye charms; spotted crab shell found beachcombing on Fanalei, South Malaita, in the Solomon Islands.

YOU SPARKED MY INTEREST, 1992
Dim.: 17 × 5 in. (43.0 × 13.0 cm)

Part of old stove that had cooked grits and grunts in Key West; New Guinea Highlands cowries, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become bridewealth; Midwestern wood-and-leather lure, well-fished; small bulb that can still light; Solomon Islands grass skirt fibers; *ngarangar*, the coconut shell cup for drinking kava which is the beverage central to Pohnpei culture, made by pounding a narcotic pepper root.

NIGHTJAR MOON, 1993
Dim.: 18 × 4 in. (46.0 × 10.0 cm)

Antique, long-handled Argentinean flat brass spoon from Ariel's hacienda; golden origami paper from American Museum of Natural History, NYC; Solomon Islands cat's eyes—the operculum of green turban sea snails; small bird skull and tail feathers from a chuck-will's-widow of the nightjar family, found floating in Indian Creek, Miami Beach while sculling.

ATTAINING BALANCE, 2015
Dim.: 9 × 3 in. (23.0 × 8.0 cm)

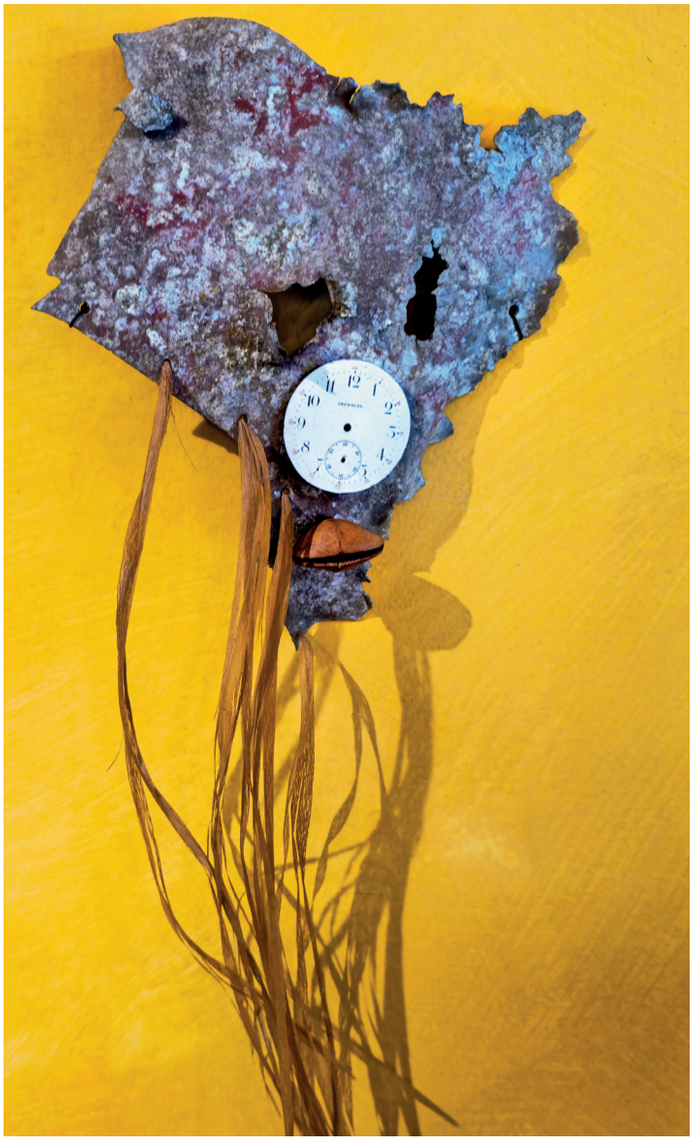
Antique Chilean Spur; Solomon Islands cat's eyes—the operculum of green turban sea snails; hammerhead from an old-timer Oregon carpenter.

WILD THING, 1993
Dim.: 13 × 23 in. (33.0 × 58.0 cm)

Piece of George Harvey's sailing boat that he took conching for twenty years off Middle Caicos, Turks and Caicos, one of the last British colonies on earth; pair of conch opercula from Turks and Caicos; metal folk beads from Orissa, India; "modern man in overcoat" printing block found in Tokyo; *robo manole* dolphin teeth from Fanalei, South Malaita, Solomon Islands.

CONDUIT BETWEEN DOMAINS, 2016
Dim.: 3.5 × 3.5 in. (9.0 × 9.0 cm)

Experimental metal piece from Bell Laboratory, New Jersey; cassowary feathers from New Guinea Highlands *sing-sing* headdress; New Guinea Highlands cowries, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become bridewealth; coral fragment found beachcombing in the Bahamas; Spanish coins of King Carlos dated 1975, collected in Vigo, Galicia during fieldwork in Spain.



AERIAL DANCE ON FRAGMENTS OF TIME, 2020
Dim.: 18 × 7 in. (45.5 × 18.0 cm)

Bit of WWII bombed plane still bearing some red paint, found in Marshall Islands; dance skirt raffia from Micronesia; antique pocket watch face; dance rattle seed pod from Sa'a Village, South Malaita, Solomon Islands.

INTREPIDLY INTRIGUING, 2005
Dim.: 4.5 × 4.5 in. (11.0 × 11.0 cm)

Military Order of the Serpent, 1912, Atlantic City: Supreme Convocation Medal among a subgroup of Spanish-American War veterans; handmade bell from herders in Burma; Solomon Islands cat's eyes—the operculum of green turban sea snails.

PARCHED SHOE REVIVING MEMORIES, 2019
Dim.: 9.5 × 3.5 in. (24.0 × 9.0 cm)

Leather shoe found at an abandoned nitrate mine in the desert high above Iquique, Northern Chile; New Guinea Highlands cowries, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become bridewealth; *robo manole* dolphin tooth from Fanalei, South Malaita, Solomon Islands.

ANIMAL WHO RESOLVES PRESSING ISSUES, 2024
Dim.: 6 × 3.5 in. (15.0 × 9.0 cm)

French *Titan à Vis Press-Viande* (meat patty press) collected in Montemor-o-Novo, Portugal; Solomon Islands cat's eyes—the operculum of green turban sea snails.

INFINITE PATIENCE, 2020
Dim.: 8 × 2.5 in. (20.0 × 6.0 cm)

Clock movement that longtime Key West Mayor Sonny McCoy gave me from the Buckeye Cigar Factory of Señor Lucignani; double spoon lure with fur that caught many Lake Michigan bass in its day; spike tool from Oregon; Solomon Islands cat's eyes—the operculum of green turban sea snails; bronze mortar for mashing betel nut, collected in Inle Lake, Burma.

AWAKING CLEAR MIND, 2022
Dim.: 7.5 × 5.0 in. (19.0 × 13.0 cm)

Vintage alarm clock found in Oruro, near the world's largest salt flat, Salar de Uyuni, Bolivia; New Guinea Highlands cowries, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become bridewealth; seaworm shell from Solomon Islands.

LORD OF THE HAPPY ENDING, 2025
Dim.: 11.5 × 2.5 in. (29.0 × 6.0 cm)

Vintage wooden plane found in a Lisbon warehouse, Portugal; Solomon Islands cat's eyes—the operculum of green turban sea snails; *robo manole* dolphin tooth from Fanalei, South Malaita, Solomon Islands.

TUNED TO THE INNER RHYTHMS OF OTHERS, 2025
Dim.: 16 × 5 in. (41.0 × 12.0 cm)

Licorice Stick body of an ELTON clarinet, ebonite with nickel-silver keywork, circa 1920s-1930s, used as studio prop by my father, Stanley, for Jazz Age historical painting in early 1960s; antique navigation compass from my childhood; Solomon Islands cat's eyes—the operculum of green turban sea snails; ancient Pyu (200–800 CE) beads found in the banks of the Irrawaddy River, Burma.

UNSTOPPING EARTH ENERGIES, 2025
Dim.: 7 × 3.5 in. (16.0 × 8.0 cm)

Vintage Spanish wooden corkscrew; dried olive found fallen from beloved 3,360-year-old Mouchão olive tree, certified among Portugal's Oliveiras Milenares; Naga headhunter's blue glass bead from Nagaland, NE India; hand-cut cowries from Gujarat, India.

CALIBRATING THE UNSEEN, 2026
Dim.: 6 × 2.5 in. (15.0 × 6.0 cm)

Yellow twisting seed pod picked from a tree growing in the desert of Copiapó, Chile; cowries used by the Banjara, a traditionally nomadic people from India, to decorate their headdresses for carrying water pots; vintage foldable yellow measuring stick found in Mutton Street market, Mumbai, India.

Calibrating the Unseen alongside the Indian goddess, Padmavati.

SPRING WALK I AND II, 1990
Dim.: 18 × 5 in. (46.0 × 13.0 cm)

Weathered striped fence boards from Grunt Bone Alley, Key West, Florida; industrial springs found in Stock Island, Key West; New Guinea Highlands cowries, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become bridewealth; seeds from a dance rattle collected at a Malaitan feast in the Solomon Islands.

FRA JEROME, 1998
Dim.: 20 × 11 in. (51.0 × 28.0 cm)

Ford truck brake part found on Cat Island, kneeling at the base of the highest point in the Bahamas where Father Jerome built his contemplative hermitage on the peak of Mt. Alvernia in 1939; New Guinea Highlands cowries, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become bridewealth.

FLY WITH THE ELEMENT OF SURPRISE, 2015
Dim.: 8 × 12 in. (20.0 × 30.0 cm)

Silver hair of my Heart Father Mainey (Prof. Milton Brown), American art historian and native of New York City; dove wings after a cat ate dinner in Miami Shores, Florida; Solomon Islands cat's eyes—the operculum of green turban sea snails; vintage brass Primus soldering iron No. 632, made in Sweden and collected in Colchagua, Chile.

DANGEROUS CHILD OF NATURE, 1990
Dim.: 7 × 10 in. (18.0 × 25.0 cm)

Green metal boat step presented to me by a Cuban boat captain in Key West; New Guinea Highlands prized boar tusks; Big Pine Key car part, Florida Keys.

COMPOSING SECRET UTTERANCES, 2001
Dim.: 10 × 6 in. (26.0 × 15.0 cm)

Seal of Shubert, Nebraska Council dated 1928 and decorated with red stars, found in Sheridan, Wyoming; Guatemalan colonial blue glass beads.

Composing Secret Utterances faces the Burmese nat Cock that the trance dancer holds while interacting with the inveterate cockfighter and lover nat, Ko Gyi Kyaw.

MONICA NEAT'S BICYCLE SEAT, 1996
Dim.: 12 × 15 in. (30.0 × 38.0 cm)

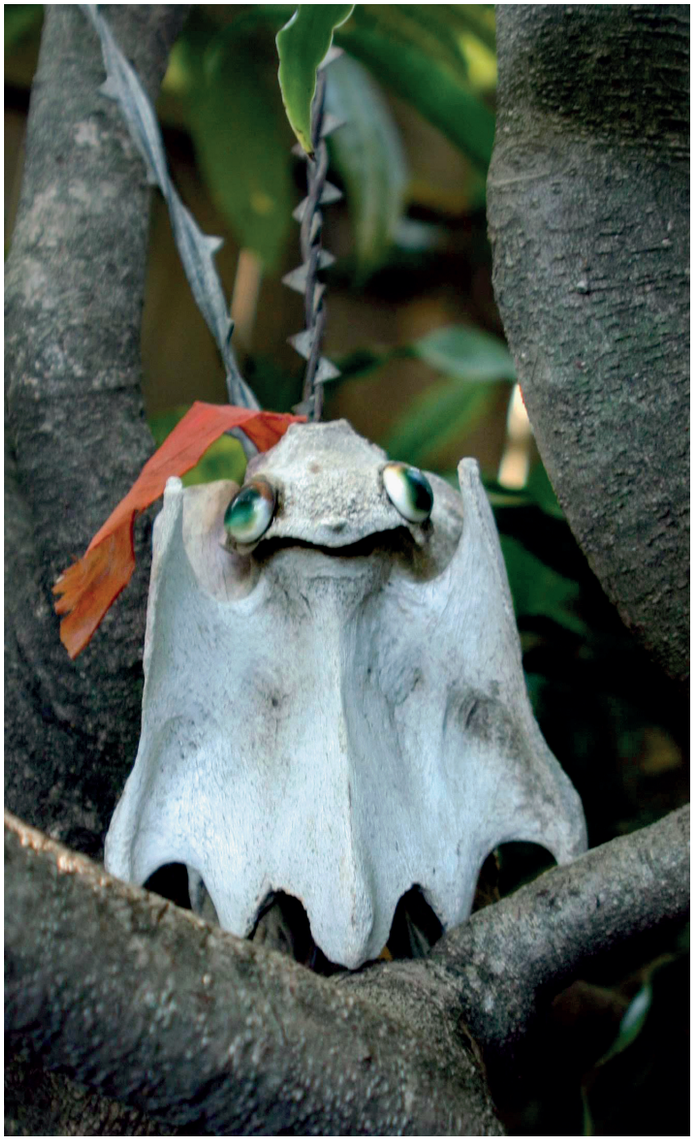
Monica Neat's well-worn bicycle seat from Conch Bar, Middle Caicos, in Turks and Caicos, one of the last British colonies on earth; ram's horns from Meteora, Greece; vertebra of a bayou alligator; clear glass marbles, photo props for Lanny Provo; red oil from pandanus nuts worn at New Guinea singsings in order to shine with the presence of Ancestor Spirits.

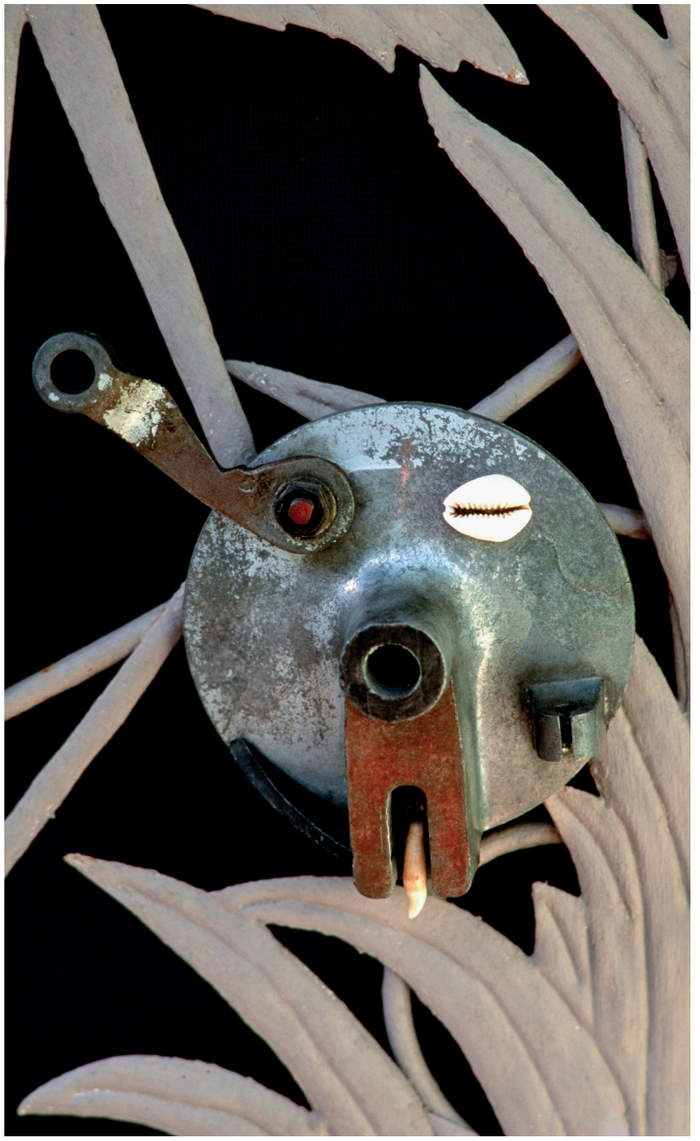
FOREST BATHING, 2001
Dim.: 10 × 7 in. (26.0 × 18.0 cm)

Primus stove from the Solomons' colonial days found in South Malaita; Louisiana hunter's gift of budding antlers from a young buck; Humpback cowrie from Fanalei, South Malaita; green and red glass; large glass marble with white patina; black glass marbles.

DIVA, 1997
Dim.: 10 × 4 in. (25.0 × 10.0 cm)

Magic medicine gourd covered in fibers with patina from years of use, a gift from Singano Saidi, the renowned *mganga* from Yoghoi Mji, Lushoto, Tanzania; old rubber machine part; Rod Neumann's silver cornet music stand from his fifth-grade band in Temperance, Michigan; New Guinea Highlands cuscus fur from warrior's wig; whorled land snails collected by Heart Father Mainey (Prof. Milton Brown) along the shores of Lake Okeechobee, Florida.





WHAT IS BRED IN THE BONE, 1996
Dim.: 12 × 5 in. (30.0 × 13.0 cm)

Ecuadorean bovine bone brought back by Arietta Venizelos; Montana vintage barbed wire; Solomon Islands cat's eyes—the operculum of green turban sea snails; red bark fiber from dance skirt, Cook Islands, South Pacific.

THE MOON SHOT AN OCTAVE, 2001
Dim.: 8 × 5 in. (20.0 × 13.0 cm)

New Guinea Highlands cowrie, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become bridewealth; *robo manole* dolphin tooth from Fanalei, South Malaita, Solomon Islands; red clay from Chilean desert; motorcycle part presented by Longevity Team's John Long at his workshop along the Miami River.

DEEPLY SUGGESTIVE, 2019
Dim.: 3 × 2 in. (8.0 × 5.0 cm)

China doll legs found by Lake Pontchartrain, Louisiana; Burmese bronze bell from the Raj era; Solomon Islands cat's eyes—the operculum of green turban sea snails; New Guinea dog tooth worn at feasts.

VISIONARY, 2001
Dim.: 12 × 4 in. (30.0 × 10.0 cm)

Yellow-tipped red parrot feather from Xochipili, my Mexican parrot; flattened pipe from Key West, Florida; Solomon Islands cat's eyes—the operculum of green turban sea snails.

LIFEFORCE OF HER OWN BEING, 1985
Dim.: 8 × 6 in. (20.0 × 15.0 cm)

Motorcycle part presented to me by Longevity Team's John Long at his workshop along the Miami River; New Guinea Highlands cowries, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become bridewealth.

MONOCLE, 1985
Dim.: 8 × 6 in. (20.0 × 15.0 cm)

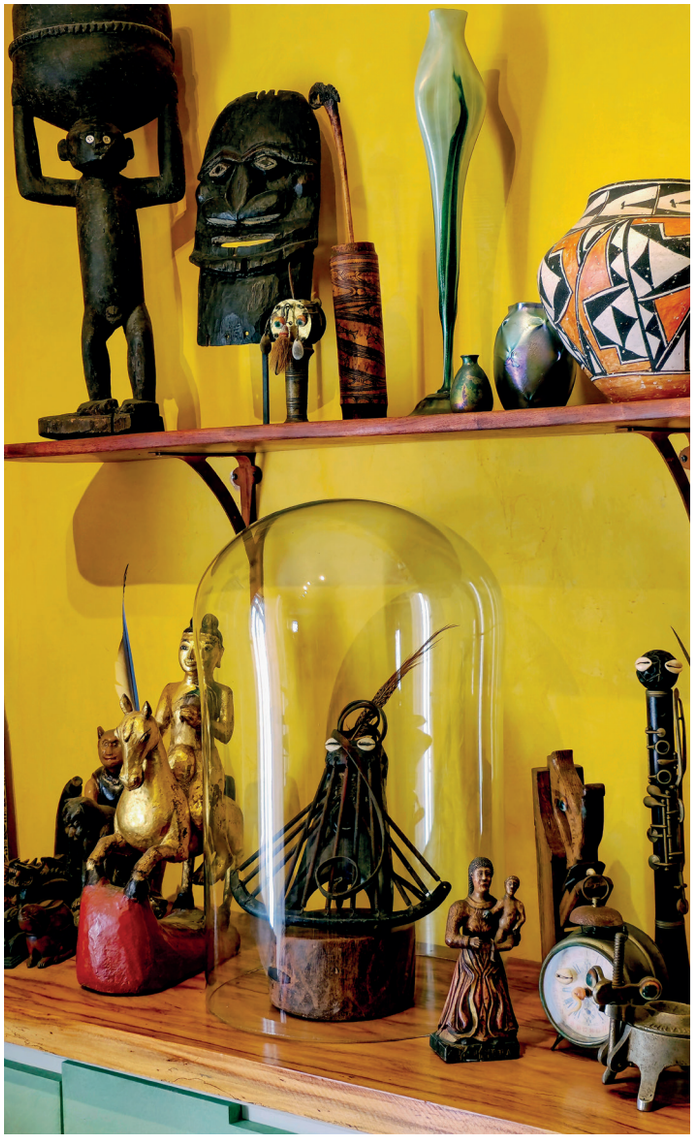
Motorcycle part presented to me by Longevity Team's John Long at his workshop along the Miami River; New Guinea Highlands cowries, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become bridewealth; spine from a beach in Long Island, Bahamas.

SOUL CATCHER, 2000
Dim.: 10 × 9 in. (25.0 × 23.0 cm)

Catcher's mask from the heyday of 20th century baseball in NYC; tiger cowries from the Solomon Islands.

LEAD ME TO THE FISH TODAY, 1988
Dim.: 9 × 7 in. (23.0 × 18.0 cm)

Motorcycle part presented to me by Longevity Team's John Long at his workshop along the Miami River; Miami boot blacking; New Guinea Highlands cowries, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become bridewealth; *robo manole* dolphin tooth worn at feasts in Fanalei Village, South Malaita, Solomon Islands.



WHIMSICALLY RESONATING, 1995
Dim.: 12 × 9 in. (30.0 × 23.0 cm)

Metal bones of a bicycle seat found walking into the gales of Puerto Aldea, Tongoy Bay, Chile; pheasant feathers; long leather strap found cleaning out old ranch barn in Big Horns, Wyoming; New Guinea Highlands bridewealth cowries.

Whimsically Resonating rests under her bell jar, between the Burmese nat Ko Gyi Kyaw riding his gilded horse and a 17th-century Virgin of Peneda with other Cargo Art friends. Infinite Patience is above, along with Fanalei's Port Adam Passage feast bowl held up by a man with button eyes, and a New Caledonia mask.

CRY-FOR-BUSCUITS, 2001
Dim.: 5 × 7 in. (13.0 × 18.0 cm)

Darwin's teapot from Totoral Caleta, Chile; New Guinea Highlands cowries, traded far inland from the sea and hand-cut to become bridewealth.

Cry-for-Biscuits sits surrounded by other spouted friends, who are ewers from Kashmir, Iran, and Uzbekistan. Fooling fellow anthropologists is particularly rewarding when they think the Cargo Creature comes from another culture.

ARTIST STATEMENT OF SARAH KEENE MELTZOFF

Sarah wearing Fanalei traditional dolphin teeth headband on wedding day in NYC, 1981

Growing up, our house was filled with Victorian furniture, books, and my father Stanley's paintings and props. Stanley Meltzoff was a prominent American illustrator for history and science who pioneered underwater fish painting. My mother Alice Forder was a stage actress in New York before WWII, who became a social worker concerned with social justice. Sister Annie Laurie responded to this unconventional household by becoming a poet-artist and yoga meditation teacher in Davis, California. She married medieval Spanish folklore professor Samuel Armistead, renowned for singing and preserving Sephardic ballads.

I spent my childhood climbing trees, sailing, and collecting butterflies, imagining becoming an explorer. I found my calling in cultural anthropology and Cargo Art. Gathering folk art and ethnographic objects with a passion began during my travels while still an undergraduate at Connecticut College. I spent half a year in traditional Mayan villages from San Cristóbal de las Casas, Mexico to the Western Highlands of Guatemala. Upon graduation, I won a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship to live in Oceania, where cargo cults and ethnic art drew me in. Taking up photography, I began recording disappearing village life among the rainforests and reefs.

My main book, a lifetime of fieldwork in stories, is an ethnographic narrative, *Listening to Sea Lions: Currents of Change from Galapagos to Patagonia*. For my work on the Solomons, I wrote *Custom Versus Civilization*, exploring the juxtapositions of so-called "primitive" and industrial societies. Now, as an emeritus professor living in Lisbon, I am focusing on Cargo Art and Burmese ethnography.

SARAH KEENE MELTZOFF

VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGIST, ETHNOGRAPHER AND PHOTOGRAPHER

The artist's work represents an intersection of ethnographic research and visual documentation, creating an archive of cultural change and human adaptation across global communities over five decades.

ARTISTIC PRACTICE

Medium: photography, digital imaging, ethnography. Focus: cultural documentation through ethnography combining participant observation with visual storytelling.

For over half a century, Sarah Keene Meltzoff's work has utilized photography to record cultural change and the human experience across multiple continents. Her practice emphasizes qualitative, in-depth life and work histories, journaling and storytelling, including letters from the field, all grounded in visual anthropology.

MAJOR FIELDWORK PROJECTS

OCEANIA TRANSPARENCY SERIES (1980S–PRESENT)

Initially having had her work at Blackstar Photo Agency, NYC, Sarah Keene Meltzoff transitioned to digital photography, uploading her transparencies to Google Photos. Creating an accessible archive of Pacific Island cultures, she donated her visual fieldwork collection, journals, and fieldnotes to the National Anthropology Archive at the Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.

SOLOMON ISLANDS (1973–ONGOING)

Living among the Fanalei dolphin hunters and Sa'a tuna hunters of South Malaita, she documented the intersection of traditional practices with Solomon Taiyo Ltd, a Japanese fishing joint venture, and has explored human-environment interactions. Research supported by a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship, the Rockefeller Foundation, ICLARM, and The Dolphin Project.

SPAIN (1983–1991)

Collaborative fieldwork chronicling Spain's entry into the European Economic Community in fisheries, from Vigo to Madrid, and extending to the Canary Islands and Morocco. Final work in Galicia focused on *marisquadoras*—shellfish harvesting women—undergoing cultural transformation in Illa de Arousa, with research translated into the Galician language. Supported by the National Science Foundation.

ECUADOR (1984)

Examination of shrimp mariculture and mangrove destruction, which resulted in seminal field research with Edward LiPuma on the emerging "Pink Gold" mariculture industry. Research supported by the Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science, University of Miami.

FLORIDA KEYS (1988)

Year-long residency in Key West documenting the demise of artisanal fisheries and the transition of fish houses into marinas amid rampant overdevelopment. Research funded by Florida Sea Grant.

CHILE AND SOUTHERN PERU (1995–2001)

Extensive ethnography along Chile's coastline extending into Paracas, southern Peru, investigating how fisheries relate to ENSO events and how fisheries management and climate modeling interact. Research funded by NOAA and the National Science Foundation.

GALAPAGOS (1999–2025)

Co-founded NGO Intercultural Outreach Initiative (IOI) on Isabela Island in Puerto Villamil. Described conservation efforts, addressing both fisheries and ever-expanding tourism in this fragile ecosystem.

BURMA/MYANMAR (1997–2019)

Annual fieldwork during Burma's societal reopening after 50 years of isolation. Focus on changes in nat spirit worship and magic within Buddhist culture, influenced by exposure to tourism, Korean soap operas, internet, and smartphones becoming ubiquitous.

METHODOLOGY

The artist's fieldwork relies on empathic ethnography, combining participant observation with open-ended, in-depth life and work histories. Her multi-sited ethnographic research spans fifty years, exploring multiple political levels within historic contexts across four continents.

COMPILATION, ORGANIZATION AND TEXTS
SARAH KEENE MELTZOFF

PHOTOGRAPHY
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MAY 2026

MASK TO HIDE EMOTIONS, 1993
Dim.: 8 × 4 in. (20.0 × 10.0 cm)

Vintage Japanese canvas gas mask found in a Kyoto temple flea market; seed pod from an ankle dance rattle, South Malaita, Solomon Islands; Solomon Islands cat's eyes—the operculum of green turban sea snails; my childhood Chinese brass bell.

Sarah Keene Meltzoff's Cargo Art—assemblages created from ethnographic materials and found objects collected during five decades of fieldwork—bridges visual anthropology and artistic practice. Her work documents cultural change and the human experience from the Solomon Islands to Burma. Focusing on photography, life and work histories, journals, and letters from the field, she transforms ethnographic observations into three-dimensional works with humor and compassion.

Diana Wanegalo, Fathleen Fugui, and Anne Alaha playing at catching hold of dolphins inside the Passage, Fanalei, 2015

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